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“ I would put a bullet through your head ”

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A
FINAL
RECKONING

A Tale of Bush Life in Australia

by
G. A. HENTY



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CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN WINDOW

"You are the most troublesome boy in the village, Reuben Whitney, and you will come to a bad end." The words followed a shower of cuts with the cane.

The speaker was an elderly man, the master of the village school of Tipping, near Lewes, in Sussex, and the words were elicited in no small degree by the vexation of the speaker at his inability to wring a cry from the boy whom he was striking. He was a lad of some thirteen years of age, with a face naturally bright and intelligent, but at present quivering with anger.

"I don't care if I do," he said defiantly. "It won't be my fault, but yours and the rest of them."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," the master said, "instead of speaking in that way. You, who learn easier than anyone here, and could always be at the top of your class if you chose. I had hoped better things of you, Reuben; but it's just the way, it's you bright boys as mostly gets into mischief."

At this moment the door of the schoolroom opened and a lady with two girls, one of about fourteen and the other eleven years of age, entered.

"What is the matter now?" the lady asked, seeing the schoolmaster cane in hand and the boy standing before him. "Reuben Whitney! What, in trouble again, Reuben? I am afraid you are a very troublesome boy."

"I am not troublesome, ma'm," the boy said sturdily. "That is, I wouldn't be if they would let me alone; but

everything that is done bad they put it down to me."

"What has the boy been doing now, Mr. White?" the lady asked.

"Look there, ma'm, at those four windows all smashed, and the squire had all the broken panes mended only a fortnight ago."

"How was it done, Mr. White?"

"By a big stone, ma'm, which caught the frame where they joined and smashed them all."

"I did not do it, Mrs. Ellison, indeed I didn't."

"Why do you suppose it was Reuben?" Mrs. Ellison asked the master.

"Because I had kept him in half an hour after the others went home to dinner for pinching young Jones and making him call out, and he had only just gone out of the gate when I heard the smash; so there is no doubt about it, for all the others must have been in at their dinner at that time."

"I didn't do it, ma'm," the boy repeated. "Directly I got out of the gate I started off to run home. I hadn't gone not twenty yards when I heard a smash; but I wasn't going for to stop to see what it was, it weren't no business of mine, and that's all I know about it."

"Mamma," the younger of the two girls said eagerly, "what he says is quite true. You know you let me run down the village with the jelly for Mrs. Thomson's child, and as I was coming down the road I saw a boy come out of the gate of the school and run away, and then I heard a noise of broken glass, and I saw another boy jump over the hedge opposite and run too. He came my way, and directly he saw me he ran to a gate and climbed over."

"Do you know who it was, Kate?" Mrs. Ellison asked.

"Yes, mamma. It was Tom Thorne."

"Is Thomas Thorne here?" Mrs. Ellison asked in a loud voice.

There was a general turning of the heads of the children to the point where a boy somewhat bigger than the rest had been apparently studying his lessons with great diligence.

"Come here, Tom Thorne," Mrs. Ellison said.

The boy slouched up with a sullen face.

"You hear what my daughter says, Tom. What have you to say in reply?"

"I didn't throw the stone at the window," the boy replied; "I chucked it at a sparrow, and it weren't my fault if it missed him and broke the window." ^

"I should say it was your fault, Tom," Mrs. Ellison said sharply—"very much your fault, if you throw a great stone at a bird without taking care to see what it may hit. But that is nothing to your fault in letting another boy be punished for what you did. I shall report the matter to the squire, and he will speak to your father about it. Mr. White, I will speak to you outside."

Followed by her daughters Mrs. Ellison went out, Kate giving a little nod in reply to the grateful look that Reuben Whitney cast towards her.

"Walk on, my dears," Mrs. Ellison said; "I will overtake you in a minute or two.

"This will not do, Mr. White," she said when she was alone with the master. "I have told you before that I did not approve of your thrashing so much, and now it is proved that you punish upon suspicion only. I shall report the case at once to the squire, and unless I am greatly mistaken you will have to look out for another place."

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Ellison, indeed I am; and it is not often I use the cane now. If it had been anyone else

I might have believed him, but Reuben Whitney is always in mischief."

"No wonder he is in mischief," the lady said severely, "if he is punished without a hearing for all the misdeeds of others."

Reuben Whitney was the son of a miller near Tipping. John Whitney had been considered a well-to-do man, but he had speculated in corn and had got into difficulties, and his body was one day found floating in the mill dam. No one knew whether it was the result of intention or accident, but the jury of his neighbours who sat upon the inquest gave him the benefit of the doubt and brought in a verdict of "accidental death". He was but tenant of the mill, and when all the creditors were satisfied, there were only a few pounds remaining for the widow. With these she opened a little shop in Tipping. The profits were small, but the squire, who had known her husband, charged but a nominal rent for the cottage, and this was more than paid by the fruit trees in the garden, which also supplied her with potatoes and vegetables, so that she managed to support her boy and herself in tolerable comfort.

She had as a girl received an education which raised her somewhat above the other villagers of Tipping, and of an evening she was in the habit of helping Reuben with his lessons, and trying to correct the broadness of dialect which he picked up from the other boys. She was an active and bustling woman, managed her little shop well, and kept the garden, with Reuben's assistance, in excellent order. Mrs. Ellison had, at her first arrival in the village three years before, done much to give her a good start, by ordering that all articles of use for the house, in which she dealt, should be purchased of her; and she highly approved of the energy and independence of the young widow. But lately there had been an estrangement between the

squire's wife and the village shopkeeper. Mrs. Ellison, whose husband owned all the houses in the village, as well as the land surrounding it, was accustomed to speak her mind very freely to the wives of the villagers. She was kindness itself in cases of illness or distress, and her kitchen supplied soups, jellies, and nourishing food to all who required it; but in return Mrs. Ellison expected her lectures on waste, untidiness, and mismanagement to be listened to with respect and reverence. She was, then, at once surprised and displeased when, two or three months before, having spoken sharply to Mrs. Whitney as to the alleged delinquencies of Reuben, she found herself decidedly, though not disrespectfully, replied to.

"The other boys are always set against my Reuben," Mrs. Whitney said, "because he is a stranger in the village and has no father, and whatever is done they throw it on to him. The boy is not a bad boy, ma'm—not in any way a bad boy. He may get into mischief like the rest, but he is not a bit worse than others, not half as bad as some of them; and those who have told you that he is haven't told you the truth."

Mrs. Ellison had not liked it. She was not accustomed to be answered except by excuses and apologies, and Mrs. Whitney's independent manner of speaking came upon her almost as an act of rebellion in her own kingdom. She was too fair, however, to withdraw her custom from the shop, but from that time she had not herself entered it.

That evening at dinner Mrs. Ellison told the squire of the scene in the schoolroom.

"White must go," he said, "that is quite evident. I have seen for some time that we wanted a younger man more abreast of the times than White is; but I don't like turning him adrift altogether; he has been here upwards of thirty years. What am I to do with him?"

Mrs. Ellison could make no suggestion, but she too disliked the thought of anyone in the village being turned adrift upon the world.

"The very thing!" the squire exclaimed suddenly. "We will make him clerk. Old Peters has long been past his work. The old man must be seventy-five if he's a day, and his voice quavers so that it makes the boys laugh. We will pension him off. I don't suppose it will be for many years. As for White, he cannot be much above sixty. He will fill the place very well. I am sure the vicar will agree, for he has been speaking to me about Peters being past his work for the last five years. What do you say, my dear?"

"I think that will do very well, William," Mrs. Ellison replied, "and will get over the difficulty altogether."

"So you see, wife, for once that boy of Widow Whitney's was not to blame. I told you you took those stories on trust against him too readily. The boy's a bit of a pickle, no doubt, and I very near gave him a thrashing myself a fortnight since, for on going up to the seven-acre field I found him riding barebacked on that young pony I intended for Kate."

"You don't say so, William!" Mrs. Ellison exclaimed, greatly shocked. "I never heard of such an impudent thing. I really wonder you didn't thrash him."

"Well, perhaps I should have done so, my dear; but the fact is, I caught sight of him some time before he saw me, and he was really sitting her so well that I could not find it in my heart to call out. He was really doing me a service. The pony had never been ridden, and was as wild as a wild goat. Thomas is too old, in fact, to break it in, and I should have had to get someone to do it, and pay him two or three pounds for the job. It was not the first time the boy had been on her back, I could see. The pony was not quite broken and just as I came on the scene was trying its

best to get rid of him, but it couldn't do it; and I could see by the way he rode her about afterwards that he had got her completely in hand, and a very pretty-going little thing she will turn out."

"But what did you say to him, William?"

"I gave the young scamp a blowing-up."

"Not much of a blowing up, I am sure," Mrs. Ellison said; "and as likely as not a shilling at the end of it."

"Well, Mary, I must own," the squire said pleasantly, "that a shilling did find its way out of my pocket into his."

"It's too bad of you, William," Mrs. Ellison said indignantly. "Here is this boy, who is notoriously a scape-grace, has the impertinence to ride your horse, and you encourage him in his misdeeds by giving him a shilling."

"Well, my dear, don't you see I saved two pounds nineteen by the transaction. Besides," he added more seriously, "I think the boy had been maligned; I don't fancy he's a bad lad at all. A little mischief and so on, but none the worse for that."

"I called him to me when he got off, and pretty scared he looked when he saw me. When he came up I asked him how he dared to ride my horses about without my leave. Of course he said he was sorry, which meant nothing, and he added, as a sort of excuse, that he used from a child to ride the horses at the mill down to the ford for water, and that his father generally had a young one or two in that paddock of his by the mill, and he used often to ride them; and seeing the pony one day galloping about the field and kicking up its heels, he wondered whether he could sit a horse still, and especially whether he could keep on that pony's back. Then he set out to try."

"The pony flung him several times at first; and no wonder, as he had no saddle and only a piece of old rope

for a bridle, but he mastered him at last; and he assured me that he had never used the stick, and certainly he had not one when I saw him. I told him, of course, that he knew he ought not to have done it; but that, as he had taken it in hand, he might finish it. I said that I intended to have it broken in for Kate, and that he had best get a bit of sacking and put it on sideways, to accustom the pony to carry a lady. Then I gave him a shilling, and told him I would give him five more when he could tell me the pony was sufficiently broken and gentle to carry Kate."

Mrs. Ellison shook her head in disapprobation.

"It is of no use, William, my talking to the villagers as to the ways of their boys, if that is the way you counteract my advice."

"But I don't always, my dear," the squire said blandly. "For instance, I shall go round to-morrow morning with my dog-whip to Thorne's, and I shall offer him the choice of giving that boy of his the soundest thrashing he ever had while I stand by to see it, or of going out of his house at the end of the quarter. I rather hope he will choose the latter alternative. That beershop of his is the haunt of all the idle fellows in the village. I have a strong suspicion that he is in league with the poachers, if he doesn't poach himself."

A few days later, when Kate Ellison issued from the gate of the house, which lay just at the end of the village, with the basket containing some jelly and medicine for a sick child, she found Reuben Whitney awaiting her. He touched his cap.

"Please, miss, I made bold to come here to thank you for having cleared me."

"But I couldn't help clearing you, Reuben, for you see I knew it wasn't you."

"Well, miss, it was very kind all the same, and I am very much obliged to you."

"But why do you get into scrapes?" the girl said; "if you didn't you wouldn't be suspected of other things. Mamma said the other day you got into more scrapes than any boy in the village. Why do you do it?"

"I don't know why I do it, miss," Reuben said. "I suppose it's because I don't go into the fields like most of the other boys, and haven't got much to do. But there's no great harm in them, miss, they are just larks, nothing worse."

"You don't do really bad things?" the girl asked.

"No, miss, I hope not."

"That's right," the girl said graciously. She caught somewhat of her mother's manner from going about with her to the cottages, and it seemed quite natural to her to give her advice to this village scapegrace.

"Well, try not to do these sort of things again, Reuben, because I like you, and I don't like to hear people say you are the worst boy in the village, and I don't think you are. Goodbye," and Kate Ellison proceeded on her way.

Reuben smiled as he looked after her. Owing to his memory of his former position at the mill, and to his mother's talk and teaching. Reuben did not entertain the same feeling of respect mingled with fear for the squire's family which was felt by the village in general. Instead of being two years younger than himself the girl had spoken as gravely as if she had been twenty years his senior, and Reuben could not help a smile of amusement.

"She is a dear little lady," he said as he looked after her, "and it's only natural she should talk like her mother. But Mrs. Ellison means well too, mother says; and as for the squire, he is a good fellow; I expected he would have given it to me the other day. Well, now I will go up to the

pony. One more lesson and I think a baby might ride it."

As he walked along he met Tom Thorne. There had been war between them since the affair of the broken window. Reuben had shown the other no animosity on the subject, as, having been cleared, he had felt in no way aggrieved, but Tom Thorne was very sore over it. In the first place, he had been found out; and although Reuben himself had said nothing to him respecting his conduct in allowing him to be flogged for the offence which he himself had committed, others had not been so reticent, and he had had a hard time of it in the village. Secondly, he had been severely thrashed by his father in the presence of the squire.

Tom Thorne was sitting on a gate as Reuben passed.

"You think you be a fine fellow, Reuben, but I will be even with you some day."

"You can be even with me now," Reuben said, "if you like to get off that gate."

"I bain't afeared of you, Reuben, don't you go to think it; only I ain't going to do any fighting now. Feyther says if I get into any more rows he will pay me out, so I can't lick you now, but some day I will be even with you."

"That's a good excuse," Reuben said scornfully. "However, I don't want to fight if you don't, only you keep your tongue to yourself."

Tom Thorne held his tongue, only relieving his feelings by making a grimace after Reuben as the latter passed on. In the various contests among the boys of the village, Reuben had proved himself so tough an adversary, that he did not care about entering upon what would be at best a doubtful contest with him. Contenting himself, therefore, with another muttered, "I will be even with you some day," he strolled home to his father's alehouse.

The change at the school was very speedily made.

The squire generally carried out his resolutions while they were hot, and on the very day after his conversation with his wife on the subject he went first to the vicar and arranged for the retirement of the clerk and the instalment of White in his place, and then went to the school-house and informed the master of his intention. The latter had been expecting his dismissal since Mrs. Ellison had spoken to him on the previous day and the news which the squire gave him was a relief to him. He therefore thankfully accepted the offer, and agreed to give up the school as soon as a substitute could be found.

In those days anyone was considered good enough for a village schoolmaster, and the post was generally filled by men who had failed as tradesmen and in everything else they put their hands to, and whose sole qualification for the office was that they were able to read and write. Instead of advertising, however, in the county paper, the squire wrote to an old college friend who was now in charge of a London parish, and asked him to choose a man for the post. A week later he received an answer from his friend, saying that he had chosen a man and his wife whom he thought would suit.

"The poor fellow is rather a cripple," wrote the squire's friend; "he is a wood engraver by trade, but he fell downstairs and hurt his back. The doctor who attended him at the hospital spoke to me about him; he said that he might get better in time, but that he was delicate and absolutely needed change of air and a country life. I have seen him several times, and have been much struck with his intelligence. I have selected him, not only for that reason, but because his wife is as suitable as he is. She is an admirable young woman, and was a dressmaker before he married her. She has supported them both ever since he was hurt months ago."

The squire was not quite satisfied with the letter; but, as he told himself, he could not expect to get a man trained specially as a schoolmaster to accept the post.

James Shrewsbury was, upon his arrival, much pleased with his cottage, which contrasted strongly with the room in a crowded street which he had occupied in London; and his wife was still more pleased.

"I am sure we shall be happy and comfortable here, James," she said, "and the air feels so fresh and pure that I am convinced you will soon get strong and well again."

The squire and Mrs. Ellison came down the next morning at the opening of the school, and after a chat with the new schoolmaster and his wife, the squire accompanied the former into the schoolroom.

"Look here, boys and girls," he said, "Mr. Shrewsbury has come down from London to teach you. He has been ill and is not very strong; I hope you will give him no trouble, and I can tell you it will be the worse for you if you do."

The squire's words had considerable effect, and an unusual quiet reigned in the school after he had left and the new schoolmaster opened a book. They soon found that his method of teaching was very different to that which they were accustomed to. There was no shouting or thumping on the desk with the cane, no pulling of ears or cuffing of heads. Everything was explained quietly and clearly; and when they went out of the school all agreed that the new master was a great improvement on Master White.

CHAPTER II

THE POISONED DOG

THE boys soon felt that Mr. Shrewsbury really wished to teach them, and that he was ready to assist those who wanted to get on. Reuben worked hard all through the winter and made very rapid progress, the schoolmaster doing everything in his power to help him forward, and lending him books to study at home. One morning in the spring the squire looked in at Mrs. Whitney's shop.~

"Mrs. Whitney," he said, "I don't know what you are thinking of doing with that boy of yours. Mr. Shrewsbury gives me an excellent account of him, and says that he is far and away the cleverest and most studious of the boys. I like the lad, and owe him a good turn for having broken in that pony for my daughter; besides, for his father's sake I should like to help him on. Now, in the first place, what are you thinking of doing with him?"

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you," Mrs. Whitney said. "I was thinking when he gets a little older of apprenticing him to some trade, but he is not fourteen yet."

"The best thing you can do, Mrs. Whitney. Let it be some good trade, where he can use his wits. When the time comes I shall be glad to pay his apprentice fees for him. In the meantime that is not what I have specially come about. Young Finch, who looks to my garden, is going to leave, and if you like your boy can have the place. My gardener knows his business thoroughly, and the boy can learn under him. I will pay him five shillings a week. It will break him in to work a little, and he is getting rather old for the school now. I have spoken to Shrewsbury and

he says that if the boy is disposed to go on studying in the evening, he will direct his work and help him on."

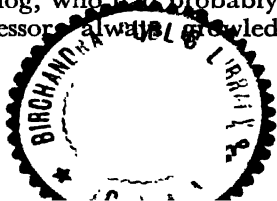
"Thank you kindly, sir," Mrs. Whitney said; "I think it will just be the thing for a year or so before he is apprenticed. He was saying only last night that he was the biggest boy in the school; and though I know he likes learning, he would like to be helping me, and feels somehow that it isn't right that he should be going on schooling while all the other boys at his age are doing something. Not that I want him to earn money, for the shop keeps us both, but it's what he thinks about it."

"That's natural enough, Mrs. Whitney, and anything the boy earns with me, you see, you can put by, and it will come in useful to him some day."

Reuben was glad when he heard of the arrangement, for although, as his mother had said, he was fond of school, he yet felt it as a sort of reproach that, while others of his age were earning money, he should be doing nothing. He accepted the offer of the school-master to continue to work at his studies in the evening, and in a week he was installed in Tom Finch's place.

The arrangement was not the squire's original idea, but that of his younger daughter, who felt a sort of proprietary interest in Reuben, partly because her evidence had cleared him of the accusation of breaking the windows, partly because he had broken in the pony for her; so when she heard that the boy was leaving, she had at once asked her father that Reuben should take his place.

Among Reuben's duties was that of feeding and attending to the dogs. These consisted of two setters, a pointer, and a large house-dog who was chained up at the entrance to the stables. Reuben was soon excellent friends with the sporting dogs, but the watchdog, who had probably been teased by Reuben's predecessors, always growled and



showed his teeth when he went near him, and Reuben never dared venture within the length of his chain, but pushed the bowl containing his food just within his reach.

One day he had been sent on an errand to the stables. He forgot the dog and ran close to the kennel. The animal at once sprang out. Reuben made a rush, but he was not quick enough, and the dog caught him by the leg. Reuben shouted, and the coachman ran out, and seizing a fork struck the dog and compelled him to loose his hold.

"Has he bit you badly, Reuben?"

"Well, he has bit precious hard," Reuben replied; "I think he has nearly taken a piece out of my calf," as, on pulling up his trousers, he showed his leg streaming with blood.

"Put it under the pump, lad; I will pump on it," the coachman said. "He's a bad-tempered brute, and I wonder the squire keeps it."

"The brute ought to be killed," Reuben grumbled angrily; "he will kill somebody some day, and it were best to kill him first."

The coachman pumped for some time on Reuben's leg, and then going into the kitchen he got some strips of rag from the cook and bound it up.

"You had best go home now," he said; "I will tell the gardener when he comes round what has happened to you. I doubt you will have to lay up for a day or two."

As Reuben limped home he met Tom Thorne walking with another boy.

"Heillo, Reuben!" the latter exclaimed; "what's come to you? yer trousers be all tore."

"That brute of a house-dog at the squire's has had hold of me," Reuben answered; "the savage beast has had a try a good many times, but this time he got hold, and he has bit me pretty sharp."

Reuben had to keep his leg quiet for three days, but the third evening he was well enough to go down the village to the schoolhouse. After the lesson was over he walked for some distance up the road, for his leg was very stiff, and he thought it would be a good thing to try and walk it off, as he intended to go to work next morning. On getting up early in the morning, however, he found it was still stiff and sore, but he thought he had better go and try to work for a bit.

"I am glad you are back again," the gardener said when he saw him, "for there's a lot of work on hand; but I see you are still lame. The coachman tells me it were a nasty bite."

"It's pretty sore still," Reuben replied, "and I don't think I can walk about much; but I thought I might help in some other way."

"Very well," the gardener said; "there are a lot of plants which want shifting into larger pots. You do them, and I will take up the fork and dig up that piece of ground I want to put the young lettuces into."

Reuben worked hard till half-past eight and then went off to his breakfast. On his return he was told the squire wished to speak to him.

"It's about that dog, I expect," the gardener remarked; "I suppose you know he were poisoned last night."

"No, I didn't know," Reuben replied; "but it's a precious good job. I wish he had been poisoned before he got his teeth into me."

Reuben on going round to the back door was shown into the library, where the squire was sitting. The coachman was with him.

"Now then, Reuben," the squire said, "I want you to tell me the truth about this matter. The coachman told me three days ago that you had been bitten by the yard dog, and I made up my mind to get rid of him on the first

opportunity, but I find he was poisoned yesterday evening."

He stopped as if expecting Reuben to say something, but the boy having nothing to say, merely replied:

"Yes, sir, so the gardener has told me."

"What do you know about it, Reuben?"

"I don't know anything about it, sir," Reuben replied, opening his eyes.

The squire set his lips hard together.

"Just tell me your story over again," he said to the coachman.

"Well, yesterday evening, squire, I went down into the village to buy some 'bacca; just as I got back to the gate out runs a boy. It was too dark for me to see his face, but I naturally supposed it were Reuben; so I said, 'Hello, Reuben, how's the leg?' But the moment I spoke he turned off from the path and ran away. Well, I thought it was qucer, but I went on to the stable. About a quarter of an hour afterwards, and as I was a-cleaning up the bits, I heard Wolf howl; he kept on at it, so I took a lantern and went to see what was the matter. He was rolling about and seemed very bad. I stood a-looking at him, wondering what were best to do, when sudden he gave a sort of yell and rolled over and he was dead. I thought it was no good telling you about it till this morning; and thinking it over, and seeing how sudden like it was, I come to the 'pinion as how he had been poisoned, and naturally thinking that, as he had bit Reuben, and as how Reuben said he ought to be killed, and seeing as I had met the boy a quarter an hour afore the dog was took bad, it came to me as how he had done it. This morning I knew for certain as the dog had been poisoned, for just outside of the reach of his chain there was that piece of paper a-lying as you have got before you."

It was a piece of blue paper, about four inches square, on which was printed "Rat poison".

"You hear that, Reuben; what have you to say?" the squire asked.

"I have got nothing to say, sir," Reuben answered, "except that whoever the boy was it wasn't me, and that I know nothing about it."

"Well, Reuben, it will be easy for you to clear yourself by saying where you were at the time. What o'clock was it, Robert, that you saw the boy?"

"It was just a quarter-past eight, squire; the quarter struck just as I opened the gate."

"Were you out or at home at that hour, Reuben?"

"I was out, sir. I went to the schoolmaster's."

"What time did you leave there?"

"I left at eight, sir."

"Then if you got in just after eight it is clear that you were not the boy," the squire said.

"I didn't get in till half-past eight, sir," Reuben said. "I walked about for a bit after I came out from school to try and get the stiffness out of my leg."

"Was anyone with you, Reuben?"

"No, sir," Reuben said quietly. "I didn't speak to a soul and didn't see a soul from the time I came out of the gate of the schoolhouse till I got home."

"Does your mother sell packets of this poison?" the squire said, pointing to the paper.

Reuben looked at the paper.

"Yes, sir; I believe she does."

"Well, my lad," the squire said, "you must acknowledge that the case looks very ugly against you."

"I don't care how bad it looks," Reuben said passionately; "it wasn't me, squire, if that were the last word I ever had to speak."

"Very well," the squire said coldly; "in my mind the evidence is overwhelming against you. I have no intention of pursuing the matter further, nor will I, for your father's and mother's sake, bring public disgrace upon you; but of course I shall not retain you here further, nor have anything to do with you in the future."

Without a word Reuben turned and left the room. With a white face he walked through the village and entered his mother's shop.

"What! back again, Reuben?" she said. "I thought your leg was too bad to work."

"It isn't my leg, mother," he said in a choking voice. "The squire has dismissed me. He says I have poisoned his dog."

"Says you poisoned his dog, Reuben! Whatever put such an idea into his head?"

Reuben summed up the points against himself, and then broke down. His mother tried in vain to pacify him, but indeed her own indignation at her boy being charged with such a thing was so great that she could do little to console him.

"It's shameful!" she exclaimed over and over again. "I call it downright wicked of the squire to suspect you of such a thing."

"Well, mother, it does look very bad against me," Reuben said, "and I don't know as the squire is so much to be blamed for suspecting me. But I can't stop here. Everyone in the village will get to know of it, and they will point at me as the boy as poisoned the squire's dog and then lied about it. I couldn't stand that, mother."

"And you sha'n't stand it, my boy," Mrs. Whitney said, "not a day. I will give up the cottage and move into Lewes at once. I dare say I shall find a cottage there, and I shall manage to get a living somehow—perhaps

open a little shop like this, and then you can be apprenticed and live at home."

An hour later Mrs. Ellison called. Reuben had gone upstairs to lie down, for his leg was very painful. Mrs. Whitney did not give her visitor time to begin.

"I know what you have called about, Mrs. Ellison, and I don't want to talk about it with you. The squire has grievously wronged my boy. I wouldn't have believed it of him, but he's done it; so now, ma'm, I give a week's notice of this house, and here's my rent up to that time, and I will send you the key when I go. And now, ma'm, as I don't want any words about it, I think it will be better if you go at once."

Mrs. Ellison saw at once in Mrs. Whitney's face that it were better not to reply to her, and that her authority as the squire's wife had for once altogether vanished. She therefore took up the money which Mrs. Whitney had laid on the counter, and without a word left the shop.

"I do believe, William," she said, as, greatly ruffled and indignant, she gave an account of the interview to the squire, "that the woman would have slapped my face if I had said anything. She is the most insolent creature I ever met."

"Well, my dear," the squire said seriously, "I can hardly wonder at the poor woman's indignation. Naturally she believes in her son's innocence, and we must not altogether blame her if she resents his dismissal. It's a sad business altogether, and I know it will be a worry and trouble to me for months."

"I really do not see why you should worry about it, William. The boy has always been a troublesome boy, and perhaps this lesson may do him good."

The squire did not attempt to argue the question. He felt really annoyed and put out, and after wandering over

the ground and stables, he went down to the schoolhouse after the children had been dismissed.

"Have you heard, Shrewsbury, about that boy Whitney?"

"No, sir, I have heard nothing about him," the schoolmaster said. "He was here yesterday evening as usual. His leg is no worse, I hope."

"I wish it had been worse," the squire said testily; "then he would have been laid up quietly at home instead of being about mischief."

"Why, what has he done, sir?" the schoolmaster asked in surprise.

The squire related the history of the dog's death and of his interview with Reuben. The schoolmaster looked serious and grieved.

"What do you think of the matter, Shrewsbury?" the squire asked when he had finished.

"I would rather not give any opinion," the schoolmaster replied quietly.

"That means you think I am wrong," the squire said quickly. "Well, say it out, man; you won't offend me. I am half inclined to think I was wrong myself, and I would as lief be told so as not."

"I don't say you are wrong, sir," the schoolmaster said, "except that I think you assumed the boy's guilt too much as a matter of course. I allow that the circumstances are much against him, but the evidence is to my mind completely overbalanced by his absolute denial. Who killed your dog I do not know, but, from my knowledge of his character and assurance of his truthfulness I am perfectly convinced that Reuben Whitney did not do it."

Mr. Ellison was silent for a few minutes.

"I don't know what to say, Shrewsbury," he said at

last. "I am afraid I have made a mess of it, but certainly as I first heard it the case seemed to admit of no doubt. 'Pon my word I don't know what to do. My wife has just been up to see Mrs Whitney, and the woman blazed out at her and wouldn't let her say a word, but gave notice that she should give up the house at the end of the week. If it hadn't been for that I might have done something; but Mrs. Ellison was very much aggrieved at her manner. Altogether it's one of the most annoying things I ever had to do with."

In the evening the schoolmaster put on his hat and went up with his wife to Mrs. Whitney.

"We have come up, Mrs. Whitney," the schoolmaster said as they entered, "to tell you how sorry we are to hear that you are going to leave, and that we are still more sorry for the cause. Of course neither my wife nor myself believe for a moment that Reuben poisoned the squire's dog, the idea is preposterous. I told the squire as much to-day."

Mrs. Whitney burst into tears. She had kept up all day, sustained partly by indignation and partly by the desire that Reuben should not see that she felt it; but she broke down now from her relief at hearing that someone besides herself believed the boy to be innocent.

"I don't know what I shall do without you, Mrs. Whitney," Mrs. Shrewsbury said when the widow recovered her composure. "I shall miss you dreadfully. Is it quite settled that you will go?"

"Quite settled, Mrs. Shrewsbury. I wouldn't stop in the squire's house for an hour longer than I could help after his believing Reuben to be guilty of poisoning his dog, and not believing the boy when he said he had nothing to do with it; he ought to have known my boy better than that."

"I can quite understand your feelings, Mrs. Whitney," the schoolmaster said. "Now tell me what are your plans."

Mrs. Whitney told her visitors what she had determined upon. As Lewes was only four miles off the schoolmaster said that he and his wife would sometimes come over to see her, and that he hoped that Reuben, whatever trade he was apprenticed to, would still go on with his studies. He would give him any advice or assistance in his power.

The next day Mrs. Whitney and Reuben moved with all their belongings to Lewes.

CHAPTER III

THE BURGLARY AT THE SQUIRE'S

"WHAT is that woman Whitney going to do with her boy?" the squire asked the schoolmaster when he happened to meet him in the village about a month after she had left. "Have you heard?"

"Nothing is settled yet, sir. My wife had a letter from her two or three days ago saying that she had been disappointed in getting Penfold the millwright to take him. He wanted fifty pounds premium, and she could only afford to pay twenty, so she is looking out for something else. You have heard nothing more that would throw any light on that affair, squire?"

"No, and don't suppose I ever shall. Have you any opinion about it?"

"My opinion is that of Reuben himself," the schoolmaster said. "He believes that someone did it who had a grudge against him, on purpose to throw suspicion on him."

"Who should have a grudge against him?" the squire asked.

"Well, squire, there was one boy in the village who had, rightly or wrongly, a grudge against Reuben. That is Tom Thorne. Reuben has not a shadow of evidence that it was this boy, but the lad has certainly been his enemy ever since that affair of breaking the windows of the school, just before I came here."

The squire took off his hat and passed his hands through his hair in perplexity.

"I don't know what to think, Shrewsbury," he said. "It may be as you say. I look upon Thorne as the worst character in the village, and likely enough his son may take after him. That alchouse of his is the resort of all the idle fellows about. I have strong reason to believe he is in alliance with the poachers. What did you say was the name of the millwright at Lewes Mrs. Whitney was wanting to get her son with?"

The schoolmaster repeated the name, which the squire jotted down in a notebook.

"Look here, Shrewsbury," he said, "don't you mention to Mrs. Whitney that you spoke to me about this matter. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir," the schoolmaster said.

And he was not surprised when, a few days afterwards, his wife received a letter from Mrs. Whitney saying that Mr. Penfold had come in to say that he had changed his mind, and that he would take Reuben as his apprentice for twenty pounds, adding, to her surprise, that he should give him half a crown a week for the first year, and gradually raise his pay, as he considered that boys ought to be able to earn a little money for themselves.

Reuben, therefore, was going to work on the following week. The half-crown a week which he was to earn was an

important matter for his mother, for although she had found a cottage and opened a little shop as before, her receipts were extremely small.

Mrs. Whitney had hoped that, although Lewes was but four miles from the village, the story about the dog would not travel so far, for it was not often that anyone from the village went over to the town. In this, however, she was mistaken, for a week after Reuben had gone to work, the foreman went to his master and said:

"I don't know whether you are aware, Mr. Penfold, about that new boy, but I hear that he had to leave Tipping, where he was employed by Squire Ellison, for poisoning the squire's dog."

"How did you hear it?" Mr. Penfold asked.

"William Jenkins heard it from a man named Thorne, who belongs to the village, and whom he met at a public-house yesterday."

"William Jenkins had best not spend so much time in public-houses," Mr. Penfold said shortly. "I heard the story before I saw the boy, and from what I hear I believe he was wrongfully accused. Just tell Jenkins that, and say that if I hear of him or any of the hands throwing the thing up in the boy's face, I will dismiss them instantly."

And so Reuben did not know till long after that the story of the killing of the dog was known to anyone at Lewes.

For three years he worked in Mr. Penfold's yard, giving much satisfaction to his employer by his steadiness and handiness. He continued his studies of an evening under the advice of his former master, who came over with his wife three or four times each year to spend a day with Mrs. Whitney. Reuben was now receiving ten shillings a week, and he and his mother were able to live in

comfort. One day, about three years after coming to Lewes, he was returning to work after dinner, when, as he passed a carriage standing in front of one of the shops, he heard his name pronounced, and the colour flushed to his cheek as looking up he saw Kate Ellison. Timidly he touched his cap and would have hurried on, but the girl called to him.

"Stop a minute, Reuben, I want to speak to you. I am glad I have met you. I have looked for you every time I have come to Lewes. I wanted to tell you that I am sure you did not kill Wolf; I know you wouldn't have done it."

"Thank you, miss," Reuben said gratefully. "I did not kill the dog. I should never have thought of such a thing, though everyone seemed against me."

"Not every one, Reuben. I didn't think so; and papa has told me since that he did not think so, and that he was afraid that he had made a mistake."

"I am glad to hear that, miss," Reuben said. "I sha'n't forget your kindness." He went on with a light heart, just as Mrs. Ellison and her elder daughter came out from the shop.

"Who were you speaking to, Kate?" she asked as she took her seat in the carriage.

"I was talking to Reuben Whitney, mamma. He was passing, so I called him to tell him that I did not believe he had killed Wolf."

"Then it was very improper behaviour on your part, Kate," her mother said angrily. "You know my opinion, on the subject. I have no doubt whatever that boy poisoned the dog. I must beg of you that you will never speak to him again."

Another year passed. Reuben was now seventeen, and was a tall, powerfully-built young fellow. During these four years he had never been over to Tipping in the day-time, but had occasionally walked over after dark to visit

the Shrewsburys, always going on special invitation when he knew that no one else would be there. The Thornes no longer occupied the little public-house. Tom Thorne had a year before been captured with two other poachers in the squire's woods, and had had six months' hard labour, and his father had at once been ejected from his house, and had disappeared from that part of the country. Reuben was glad that they had left, for he had long before heard that Thorne had spread the story in Lewes of the poisoning of the dog. He felt, however, with their departure all chance of his ever being righted in that matter was at an end.

One evening in winter when Reuben had done his work he said to his mother:

"I shall go over and see Mr. Shrewsbury to-night. I have not been over for some time, and as it is not his night for a class I am pretty sure not to find anyone there. I told him when I was there last that I would take over a few tools and fix up those shelves for him. I don't suppose he will stay very much longer at Tipping; his health is completely restored now, and even his wife admits that he could work at his own business again. He has already been doing a little for some of the houses he worked for in town, so as to get his connection back again. I expect every time I see him to hear that he has made up his mind to go. I shall miss them very much; he has been a good friend indeed to me."

The stars were shining brightly when he started at seven o'clock in the evening, and he walked with a brisk step until he arrived within half a mile of the village.

As he passed by the end of a lane which ran into the road, he heard a horse impatiently pawing the ground, the sound being followed by a savage oath to the animal to stand quiet. Reuben walked on a few steps and then

paused. The lane, as he knew, only led to some fields a short distance away. What could a horse be doing there? and who could be the man who spoke to it?

Walking upon the grass at the side of the road he retraced his steps to the end of the lane and then stood and listened. He heard a murmur of voices, and walked quietly down the lane. After going about a hundred yards he saw something dark in the road, and approaching it very cautiously found that it was a horse harnessed to a gig. As he was standing wondering what to do next he started, for the silence was broken by some voices near him.

"It was a stupid thing to get here so early, and to have to wait about four hours in this ditch."

"It was the best plan though," another voice replied. "The trap might have been noticed if we had been driving about the roads after dark, while in the daylight no one would give it a second thought."

"That's right enough," the first speaker said, "but it's precious cold here. Hand me that flask again. I am blest if the wind does not come through the hedge like a knife."

The voices came from the other side of the hedge on the opposite side of the lane. Reuben crossed noiselessly. There was a gate just where the cart had stopped, and the men had evidently got over it to obtain the shelter of the hedge from the wind. Reuben felt the gate, which was old and rickety, then cautiously he placed his feet on the lower bar and leaned forward so as to look round the hedge.

"What time are the others to be here, Tom?"

"They said they would be here at nine o'clock. We passed them about six miles on the road, so they ought to be here to time."

"I suppose there's no doubt this here being a good business?"

"I will answer for that," the other said. "I don't suppose as there's much money in the house, but there's no end of silver plate, and their watches, and plenty of sparklers. I have heard say as there's no one in the county as has more jewels than the squire's wife."

"You know the house well, don't you?"

"I never was inside," the other said, "but I have heard enough from them that has to know where the rooms lie. The plate chest is in the butler's pantry, and, as we are going to get in by the kitchen window, we are safe to be able to clear that out without being heard. I shall go on directly the others come and chuck this meat to the dogs—that will silence them. I know the way there, for I tried that on once before."

Reuben had thought that the voice was familiar to him, and the words gave him the clue—the speaker was Tom Thorne!—and he and those with him were going to commit a burglary at the squire's. He was hesitating whether to make off at once to warn the squire of what was intended, or to listen and learn a little more of their plan, when suddenly a light shone behind him, and a voice exclaimed with an oath:

"Who have we here?"

He leapt down and was in the act of turning round to defend himself, when a heavy blow with a cudgel struck him on the head and felled him insensible to the ground. While he had been listening to the conversation two men had come quietly up the lane, walking on the grass as he had done, and their footsteps had been unheard by him, for the horse continued at times impatiently to paw the ground. The sound of their comrades' voices had told them where they were sitting, and turning on a bull's-eye lantern to show them the gate, they had seen Reuben leaning over it in the act of listening.

When Reuben recovered consciousness he found that he was lying in the ditch, his hands tightly bound to his sides, and a handkerchief stuffed into his mouth. The four men were gathered close by talking in low tones.

"I ain't going to give up the job now we come so far to do it," one said with an oath; "besides, it's not only the swag but the grudge I owe the squire. If I am ready to go on I suppose you needn't be afraid; besides, he don't know us.

"Best cut his throat and a done with it," a voice which Reuben recognized as that of his old enemy said; "I owe him one, and it will be safest to stop his mouth."

"No, no," a third voice protested; "I ain't going to have nothing to do with cutting throats. But let's move a bit away from here while we settle it; you hit him pretty hard, but he will be coming round presently."

The men moved some little distance away, and for some time Reuben could hear a murmured talk, but could make out nothing of what had been said. He could feel by a warm sensation across his cheek that the blood was flowing freely from the wound he had received on his temple. A dull torpid feeling came over him, and after a time he again lost consciousness.

How long he remained in this state he did not know, but he was at last aroused by being lifted and thrown into the bottom of the cart. Four men then climbed up into it and the horse was started. The men seemed in high good humour, and talked and laughed in low tones, but the noise of the vehicle prevented Reuben hearing what was said.

It was, as far as he could judge, full two hours before the vehicle stopped. He was roughly taken out of the cart, his arms were unbound, and the men leaping up drove away at full speed. The spot where he had been left was

very dark, for trees overshadowed it on both sides. Where he was he had no idea, but he judged that he must be fully twenty miles from the village. His first impulse was to take the handkerchief from his mouth, and he then walked slowly along the road in the direction from which he had come.

After proceeding about a quarter of a mile he emerged from the wood and came upon a spot where the road forked. Having no clue whatever as to the direction in which Lewes lay, he sat down upon a heap of stones and waited patiently for morning.

It seemed to him that some three hours passed before a faint light began to dawn in the sky. By this he knew that it must be about half-past six, and calculated, therefore, he must have set out in the trap about half-past one. He now started to walk along the road, hoping that he should soon meet some labourer going to work. Stopping by a small stream which ran across the road he washed his head and face; as he had lain on the ground after being struck the blood had not flowed on to his clothes. After the wash he proceeded with a brisker step. Half an hour later he met a ploughman riding one of his team to the fields.

"Is this the road to Lewes?" Reuben asked.

"Lewes? Noa, this baint the road to Lewes. This bee the road to Hastings, if you goes further. So they tell me; I ain't never been there."

"Is there a village anywhere about here?" Reuben asked.

"Ay, half a mile or so on."

Reuben walked on till he got to the village, and then going to a public-house obtained some refreshment and learned from the landlord the direction he should take to get to the main road leading to Lewes, which was, as he expected, some twenty miles away. He found that the

cart had not followed the main road towards London, but had driven by crossroads for a considerable distance before turning north.

It was late in the afternoon before Reuben arrived at Lewes, for he had been obliged to rest often by the way, and had made but slow progress. When within a few doors of his mother's house, one of the constables of the town came up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"I arrest you in the king's name!"

"Arrest me! what for?" Reuben exclaimed.

"For breaking into the house of Squire Ellison, of Tipping, that's what it's for."

Reuben laughed.

"You have got the wrong man this time. I have no more to do with the burglary than a child."

"It's no laughing matter," the constable said. "If you are innocent you have got to prove it; that ain't no business of mine. All I have got to do is to arrest you."

So saying, and before Reuben knew what he was about, he slipped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists. Reuben saw that it was of no use to argue, and silent and pale he walked along by the side of the constable, who retained a tight hold of his collar. A little crowd gathered speedily round, for such a sight was unusual in Lewes, and Reuben felt thankful when they reached the cells. A minute later the head constable came in.

"Now, my lad, don't say anything to criminate yourself," he began; "the less you talk the better for you. I am sorry to see you here, for I knew your father, and I have a good character of you from your employer; so I give you my advice—keep your mouth shut."

"But I am not going to keep my mouth shut," Reuben said indignantly. "I want to tell you what's happened, and you will see that I am innocent at once."

"Very well, if you will you will; but mind, don't blame me afterwards."

Reuben told the story of his adventures from the time of leaving.

"There," he said when he had finished, "isn't that enough to show that I am innocent?"

"No," the chief constable said gravely, "it's not enough to prove anything one way or the other. I am bound to say the story looks a likely one, and if it weren't for two or three matters which I heard of from the constable who came over from Tipping, I should have no doubt about it. However, all that is for the magistrate to decide; there will be a meeting to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV

THE TRIAL

THERE were three magistrates on the bench on the following morning when Reuben was brought up. The justice room was crowded, for the news had created quite a sensation.

Mr. Ellison was the first to give his evidence. He testified that on waking on the previous morning he found that someone had been in his room during the night. He was not in the habit of locking his door, and had not been awakened. He found that a box which stood on the dressing table, containing some valuable jewelry, was gone, that his watch and that of Mrs. Ellison had been taken, that the drawers had been opened and a case containing the more valuable jewels of his wife had also been abstracted. This was not discovered till afterwards. He first missed his

watch. He rang the servants up, for it was still early, and it was then discovered that the lower premises had been broken into, the plate chest in the butler's pantry broken open, and a large quantity of plate stolen.

"What do you estimate the value of the articles stolen, Mr. Ellison?"

"The value of my wife's jewels I should put down roughly at two thousand pounds, the silver plate might have been worth three hundred more, the watches and other articles, so far as I yet miss them, say another hundred."

The servants proved that they found the kitchen window open on going downstairs. It had been opened by the catch being forced back. It was not the custom to put up shutters; the pantry door, which was a strong one, had been cut with a saw round the lock. The butler testified to the plate having been safe the night before, and the strong chest in which it was kept having been forced open.

Directly it was discovered the constable of the village was placed in charge of the room with orders to admit no one, and a man on horseback was sent off to Lewes to the chief constable. The village constable gave evidence as to the state of the place when he was put in charge.

The constable who had been sent over from Lewes then stepped into the witness-box. He testified to the marks of entry of the thieves, and said that the manner in which they had gone to work, and in which the door had been sawn through, and the chest forced open, seemed to show that it was the work of practised hands. On examining closely the butler's pantry he found a powerful screwdriver and a heavy chisel; these corresponded to marks in the lid, and had evidently been used for the purpose of forcing it open. They had the initials "R. W." burnt in the handles. The inmates of the house all denied any knowledge of these tools. Mr. Ellison had been present

when he showed them to Mrs. Ellison. On looking at them she said at once:

"R. W. Why, that must be Reuben Whitney, that wicked boy again."

Upon making enquiries he found that the man named worked at Mr. Penfold's, the millwright at Lewes. He returned there at once, and, going to Mr. Penfold, found the prisoner was absent from work. The men identified the brand on the tools as that of the prisoner.

Another constable proved the arrest.

The chief constable then read the statement that the prisoner had made to him.

The magistrates conferred together for a few minutes in an undertone.

"Mrs. Ellison," the senior of them said, addressing that lady, who was sitting on a chair placed at the upper end of the court, "we are sorry to trouble you, but we must ask you to go into the witness-box. I wish to ask you" he went on when she had taken her stand in the box, "how it was you at once connected the initials with the prisoner?"

"Because he had at one time lived in the village, and was employed assisting our gardener. He was discharged on suspicion of having poisoned a watch-dog which had bit him; and as the three dogs about the place had all been poisoned on the night when the house was broken into, his name had been in my mind, and, on seeing the initials, I naturally recognized them at once."

Again the magistrates consulted together.

"Mr. Ellison, we shall be obliged if you will enter the witness-box again. In your former evidence you said nothing in any way relating to the prisoner, but it now seems you had a previous acquaintance with him. Will you tell the court what it is?"

"I have not much to say," the squire said. "As a boy he

lived in the village with his mother, a most respectable person. The boy was an intelligent lad, and when the boy employed in my garden left I gave him the place. He gave every satisfaction. One day he was severely bitten by the watch-dog, and three days later the dog was found poisoned. My coachman saw a boy running away from the spot a quarter of an hour before the dog died; he believed it to be the prisoner, but it was too dark for him to distinguish the features.

"At the time I certainly suspected that he had been guilty of poisoning the dog, and as he was unable to account for where he was at the time, I discharged him. I wish to say publicly that I have deeply regretted having done so ever since, and that I consider I acted hastily and wrongly in so doing. I may also say that the schoolmaster of our village will give the prisoner the highest character for truthfulness, and he has known him ever since. His present employer, Mr. Penfold, is also, I believe, ready to testify to his excellent conduct during his four years of apprenticeship."

"I suppose, Mr. Ellison," the senior magistrate said, "you have not, at any time since the poisoning of the dog, obtained any actual evidence which would show that you were mistaken in your first view."

"That is so," the squire assented, and no further question being asked he resumed his seat. His evidence had caused surprise and some little amusement in court. It was clear that there was a strong difference of opinion between him and his wife on the subject. After some consultation the magistrate said:

"The case will be remanded until this day week to see if further evidence is forthcoming; but I may say that, under the present circumstances of the case, we shall feel ourselves obliged to send it for trial."

At the sitting a week later no fresh evidence was produced, and Reuben was committed for trial at the next assizes. Mrs. Whitney engaged a lawyer in the town to defend her son, and, to the surprise of this gentleman, Mr. Ellison called upon him two or three days later and said:

"Mr. Brogden, I hear that you have been engaged by Mrs. Whitney to defend her son. I don't believe the young fellow is guilty, and therefore I authorize you to spend any sum that may be necessary in getting up his defence, and I wish you to instruct a counsel to appear for him."

The evidence for the prosecution was to a great extent similar to that given at the enquiry before the magistrates.

The schoolmaster was the first witness called for the defence. After stating that, although no evening was actually settled for his coming over, he expected the prisoner one evening that week, and that he had promised to bring his tools over to do a little job of carpentering, he gave Reuben the highest character, saying that he had known him for five years, and that he had an absolute confidence in his integrity and honesty.

The keeper of the wayside public-house where he had breakfasted, proved that he was struck with the prisoner's appearance when he entered, that he was very pale and seemed scarcely able to walk. He had asked him the nearest way to Lewes, and had enquired whether there was any chance of getting a lift, as he was anxious to get back as soon as possible.

Mr. Penfold was the next witness. He said that the prisoner had been apprenticed to him four years previously, that his general conduct had been most excellent, and that he was remarkably quick and intelligent, and was an excellent workman. During the time that he had been employed he had never lost a day.

"At the time he was apprenticed to you, Mr. Penfold," Reuben's counsel asked, "were you aware that the lad had been summarily discharged by Mr. Ellison?"

"I was aware of that fact," Mr. Penfold answered; and Reuben with surprise looked at his employer.

"From whom did you hear of it?"

"I heard of it from Mr. Ellison himself, who called upon me about the matter."

"How was it he came to call upon you, Mr. Penfold?"

"The prisoner's mother had applied to me about apprenticing her son. I had asked £50 premium, and said that it wasn't my custom to pay any wages for the first year. She said she could only afford £20, and I thought that was an end of the matter, until a few days later Mr. Ellison called upon me and said that he had heard from the schoolmaster in his village, who was a friend of the boy's mother, how matters stood, and that her application had fallen through owing to her being unable to find more than £20. I said that this was so. Mr. Ellison then said that he was prepared to make up the deficiency, that he had a regard for the boy's father, and that, moreover, he himself had, through a hasty misconception regarding the poisoning of the dog, discharged the lad from his service, and that he felt uneasy in his mind at having been guilty of a piece of injustice. Over and above the £30 he gave me six pound ten in order that I might pay the boy half a crown a week for the first year, which he said would be a matter of consequence to his mother. He requested me on no account to let Mrs. Whitney know that he had intervened in the matter, but to represent that I changed my mind and was willing to take the £20 she offered as a premium. He was particularly anxious on this point, because, he said, she would certainly refuse to accept assistance from him, owing to

that unfortunate affair about the dog. I may say that from that time to this I have not mentioned the fact to anyone, and the sum of £20 was inserted in the indenture of apprenticeship."

There was a little movement of applause in the court as Mr. Penfold gave his evidence and Reuben looked gratefully towards Mr. Ellison and said heartily:

"I thank you, sir, with all my heart."

The foreman of the yard was next examined. He confirmed the high character Mr. Penfold had given Reuben, and adding that he knew the lad never entered a public-house, but spent his evenings almost entirely at home studying, for that he himself had many times called in and had upon every occasion found him so employed.

The counsel for the prosecution then addressed the jury, and the judge summed up. The jury consulted together for a minute or two in the jury-box and then expressed their desire to retire.

A buzz of talk arose in the court when they had left. Opinion was divided as to what the verdict would be. When the counsel for the defence sat down the general opinion was that the prisoner would be certainly acquitted, but the speech of the counsel for the prosecution had caused a reaction, and few doubted now that the verdict would be guilty. So Reuben himself thought. It was, he felt, hard that, standing there to be tried for burglary, the decision should in fact depend upon that unjust charge which had four years ago been brought against him. Reuben was in the habit of what he called arguing things out by himself, and as he stood there waiting for the verdict he tried to put himself in the position of the jury, and he felt that in that case he should have difficulty in coming to a decision.

It was not until after the lamps had been lighted that

the jury returned into the box. The crier shouted for order, and there was not a sound heard as the foreman told the judge that they were not agreed upon their verdict.

"Then you must go back, gentlemen, until you are," the judge said.

"We are eleven one way and one the other. Won't that do, my lord?"

"No, sir," the judge replied. "You must be unanimous."

The jury again retired, the judge and counsel went off to dine at the hotel, and almost all the public trooped out.

Two hours later, as the jury did not return, Reuben Whitney was taken back to the jail and the court closed.

At nine o'clock in the morning a warder entered.

"The jury have come back into the court," he said. "They are going to return a verdict."

Reuben was again placed in the dock; the seats open to the public quickly filled as the news spread through the town, several of the members of the bar dropped in, and then the judge came in and took his seat. Reuben had occupied the time in trying to judge from the faces of the jury what their verdict was going to be.

"Are you agreed, gentlemen, as to the verdict you find in this case?" the judge asked.

"We are, my lord," the foreman replied.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, my lord."

At the foreman's word a thrill had run through the court, for when it was known the evening before that eleven were one way and one the other, the belief had been general that the majority were for a conviction. Reuben himself had so understood it, and the verdict was a complete surprise to him. The constable raised the bar for him to leave the dock, and as he moved out his

friend the schoolmaster pushed forward and shook him warmly by the hand.

"Thank God for that verdict, Reuben. I am indeed rejoiced, and I own I hardly expected it."

"I didn't expect it at all," Reuben said in a choked voice.

"I congratulate you heartily, Reuben," Mr. Ellison said, putting his hand on his shoulder. The squire had waited at Lewes until ten o'clock on the previous evening, and had driven over again the first thing in the morning, so anxious was he about the verdict. "I didn't believe you guilty this time, my boy, from the first. And now, Reuben, I hope," he said as they entered the street, "that you have quite forgiven me for that old business. It has been the unfortunate cause of getting you into this affair."

"There is nothing to forgive, squire," Reuben said. "I never blamed you for it from the first; and even had I done so, your goodness, of which I only heard yesterday, would have made up many times for any mistake you may have made then."

Reuben walked quietly home so as to give the schoolmaster, who had hurried on ahead, time to break the news of his acquittal to his mother. Mrs. Whitney had remained in court during the trial, but had retired when the jury left to consider their verdict, being completely overcome with agitation and excitement. The schoolmaster had slept in the house, and had persuaded her not to go to the court in the morning, fearing as he did that the verdict would be a hostile one. She completely broke down when she was told the news, and was still sobbing when Reuben arrived. The schoolmaster at once took his leave, leaving mother and son together, and promised them to return in a day or two.

When he again came over he saw at once that Mrs. Whitney was looking depressed and unhappy.

"What do you think, Mr. Shrewsbury? Reuben says that he shall go abroad out to Australia. I have talked against it till I am hoarse, but it's no good. I hope you will persuade him to give up such a mad idea."

"I will hear what he has to say first, Mrs. Whitney. Reuben has generally a good deal to say for his side of a question and I must hear his reasons before I can argue against them. Now, Reuben, what have you to say for yourself?"

"I made up my mind while I was in jail," Reuben replied, "that if I was acquitted I would go right away. These things stick to a man all through his life. That first affair four years ago nearly got me transported now, and if a small matter like that did me such harm, what will this do? If I had been proved to be innocent it would have been different, but as it is I believe nine people out of ten in court thought I was guilty. At any rate a great many people will think me guilty all their lives unless something turns up to prove my innocence. Mother says we might settle somewhere else where we ain't known; but I should never feel safe. I have been to Mr. Penfold, and he says if I am determined to go he will cancel my indenture for me. I have no doubt I shall find work of some sort out there. My only trouble is about mother. I want her to go with me, but she won't have it. She says six months at sea will kill her, and then she has all sorts of ideas in her head about the natives. However, I hope that in two or three years' time I shall be able to write and tell her that I have comfortably settled and have a good home ready for her to come to, and that then she will join me."

"Never," Mrs. Whitney said excitedly. "I was born

at Lewes and I have lived near it all my days, and I will die here. I am not going to tramp all over the world and settle down among black people in outlandish parts."

The schoolmaster was silent for a minute. He saw that Reuben's mind was firmly made up, and he could not deny the force of his reasoning.

"Australia is not so bad a place as you fancy, Mrs. Whitney," he said at last. "They do have troubles with the natives certainly in the outlying settlements, but in the towns you have no more trouble than you have here. Six months' voyage is not so dreadful as it seems. And though I do think that if Reuben goes out it will be better for you to remain quietly here till he has a home prepared for you, I think that when the time comes you will change your mind about it. As to Reuben himself, I must own there's a good deal of force in what he says, and I have no doubt he would do well out there. But how do you intend to get out, Reuben?"

"I shall work my way out," Reuben replied. "I can do any rough work, as a smith or a carpenter, and I should think I ought to get my passage for my work. Anyhow I have got twelve pounds saved up, and if I can't get out free, that and my work ought to take me."

In a short time Mrs. Whitney, finding that Reuben was not to be shaken in his determination, ceased to oppose it, and began to busy herself in preparations for his departure, which he had arranged to take place as soon as possible.

A week later Reuben was wandering along the side of the London Docks, looking at the vessels lying there, and somewhat confused at the noise and bustle of loading and unloading that was going on. He stopped before a fine-looking barque. "Where is she going to?" he asked a sailor who was passing along the gangway to the shore.

"She's bound for Sydney," the sailor said; "she warps out of dock to-night."

Reuben stepped on board, and went up to the mate, who was superintending the cargo.

"Do you want a carpenter for the voyage out?"

"A carpenter!" the mate repeated. "Well, yes, we do want a carpenter; the man who was to have gone has been taken ill; but you are too young for the berth. Why, you don't look more than eighteen; besides, you don't look like a carpenter."

"I am a millwright," Reuben said, "and am capable of doing any ordinary jobs either in carpentering or smithwork. I have testimonials here from my late employers."

"Well, you can see the captain if you like," the mate said; "you will find him at Mr. Thompson's office in Tower Street, No. 51."

Reuben at once made his way to the office. The captain refused at first to entertain the application on the ground of his youth, but ship's carpenters were scarce, therefore, after reading the warm testimonial as to character and ability which Mr. Penfold had given Reuben, he agreed to take him on the terms of his working his passage. Reuben went back at once to the inn where he had stopped, and had his chest taken down to the docks, and went on board the *Paramatta*, which at high water warped out of dock into the stream.

CHAPTER V

ON THE VOYAGE

THE next day the *Paramatta* weighed anchor and proceeded down the river. Reuben had no time to look at the passing ships, for he was fully occupied with the many odd jobs which are sure to present themselves when a ship gets under weigh. The wind was favourable, and the sea calm.

The next morning Reuben was wanted to nail some strips of wood on the floor of some of the cabins to prevent the boxes from shooting out from under the berths when the vessel rolled. As he was at work at one of these, a young lady came to the door of the cabin and uttered a little exclamation of surprise at seeing Reuben kneeling on the floor. Then, seeing what he was doing, she said:

"Oh, you are the carpenter, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss."

"I wish you would screw on some pegs I brought with me to hang things upon. Everything does get thrown about so when the ship's rolling. They are in that trunk if you will not mind pulling it out."

Reuben pulled out the trunk, which the girl opened, and after some search produced half a dozen iron clothes pegs. She showed him where she wished them screwed on, and stood looking on while he carried out her instructions.

"You seem very young for a carpenter, don't you?"

"I am young," Reuben replied, smiling, "and this is my first voyage. Fortunately for me, the hand who was engaged hurt himself just as the vessel was sailing, so I

obtained the berth. So far it does not appear that it is a difficult one."

The girl looked at him a little curiously. His manner of talk and conversation differed so much from the sailors in general.

"Are you really a carpenter?" she asked. "You don't look like a carpenter."

"Yes, I am really a carpenter," Reuben answered; "at least I am a millwright by trade. We are a sort of half and half between carpenter and smith. Is there anything else?" he asked as he finished screwing the last screw.

"No, nothing else, thank you," the girl answered; "that will do very nicely, and I am much obliged to you."

After finishing his work in the cabins Reuben went forward.

"Captain," the young lady said as she went up on deck, "I have been talking to that young carpenter of yours. I am quite interested in him. Is he really a carpenter? He does not talk a bit like one."

"I believe so, Miss Hudson," the captain replied. "But he is an emigrant rather than a sailor, for he has only shipped for a passage. I don't know whether he is going to join a man out there; but if not, he is certainly young to go out on his own account. I do not think he's more than eighteen. He looks so young he cannot have served all his time at his trade."

"I really feel quite interested in him, Captain Wilson," the girl said, turning to a gentleman standing by who had been listening to the conversation. "I wish, if you get an opportunity, you would get into conversation with this carpenter of ours and find out something about him."

"I will, if you like, Miss Hudson; but I don't suppose there's much to find out, and what there is he' not

likely to tell me. From what you say I should guess that he had had a bad master and had run away."

"But the captain said he had good testimonials," Miss Hudson persisted.

"As to testimonials," the gentleman said, "anyone can write a testimonial."

"How suspicious you are, Captain Wilson!" the girl laughed. "That's the worst of being a police officer and having to do with criminals. You think whoever you come across is a rogue until you find out he is an honest man. Now I think everyone is honest till I find him out to be a rogue."

The voyage down to the Cape was wholly uneventful. The *Paramatta* was most fortunate in her weather, and beyond trimming the sails the crew had a very easy time of it. Captain Wilson had, as he promised Miss Hudson, taken the opportunity when Reuben was sitting idly on deck of having a chat with him, but he did not learn much in the course of the conversation.

"Your young carpenter puzzles me, Miss Hudson," he said to her at dinner. "I think that he has worked as a millwright; he spoke openly and without hesitation as to his work, but how it is he has thrown it up and emigrated so young I can't make out. Of course he cannot have served his time, and yet somehow I don't think that he has run away, from the manner in which he spoke of his employer. He has no friends whatever in Australia, as far as I could learn."

Miss Hudson was the daughter of a wealthy flock owner, or, as he was called, squatter, in New South Wales. Her father and mother were on board the ship with her. This was her fifth voyage; she had gone out as a baby with her parents, and had returned to England at the age of ten to be educated. When eighteen she had joined

her mother and father in Australia, and two years later had come with them to Europe and had spent some months travelling on the Continent. They were now on their way back to the colony. The only other single lady among the passengers of the *Paramatta* was going out under the charge of the captain to fill a place as governess in a family in Sydney. Miss Furley was somewhat quiet, but a friendship had naturally sprang up between her and Miss Hudson, as the only two young women on board the ship; and the life and high spirits of the young colonist, and the musical acquirements of Miss Furley, helped to make the voyage pass pleasantly for the passengers in the *Paramatta*.

Although the passage had been a pleasant one there was a general feeling of satisfaction when the ship dropped her anchor in Table Bay. Most of the passengers went on shore at once to take up their quarters at the hotel till she sailed again. The captain said that it would take at least a couple of days to fill up the water tanks and take in a supply of fresh provisions. On the afternoon of the second day Reuben asked permission of the first mate to go ashore for a few hours.

"Certainly, Whitney," the officer said; "you have proved a very useful hand on the way out, which is more than most do who work their passage. You can stay on shore to-night if you like, but you must come off early in the morning; we hope to get away in good time."

On landing, Reuben was much struck with the variety of the scene. In the streets of Cape Town were men of many types. Here was the English merchant and man of business looking and dressing just as he would at home. Names over the shop doors were for the most part Dutch, as was the appearance of the majority of the white men

in the streets. Dutch farmers in broad hats and homespun garments, mounted on rough ponies, clattered along through the streets. The manual work was for the most part done by swarthy natives, while among the crowd were numbers of Malays, with dark olive skins, small eyes, and jet-black hair, their women being arrayed in every shade of gaudy colour.

For some time Reuben wandered about the streets, greatly amused at all he saw. Towards evening he turned his face towards the sea, as he had no wish to avail himself of the permission given him to sleep on shore. Presently he encountered Miss Hudson and Miss Furley walking the other way. The former nodded brightly, for she had several times spoken to Reuben since their first acquaintanceship. Reuben touched his hat and proceeded on his way. He had gone but a few yards when he heard a loud cry, and everyone darted suddenly into shops or round corners.

Looking round in surprise Reuben saw what had caused the movement. A Malay, with his long hair streaming down his shoulders, was rushing down the street, giving vent to terrible yells; in his hand he held a kris, with which, just as Reuben looked round, he cut down a native who had tried too late to make his escape. The two English girls, confused and alarmed at the sudden outburst, and unable, until too late to comprehend the cause of it, stood alone in the middle of the street, and, too terrified now to move, clung to each other, regardless of the shouts to fly raised by people at the windows and doors.

The Malay, with a howl of exultation, made at them with uplifted kris. Reuben sprang forward, passed the terrified women when the Malay was within four paces of them, and threw himself with all his force upon him.

The Malay, whose eyes were fixed upon the ladies, was taken by surprise by the assault, and his kris had not time to fall when Reuben sprang upon him.

The shock threw both to the ground, Reuben, as he fell, throwing both arms round his adversary. The Malay struggled furiously, and the combatants rolled over and over on the ground. Strong as Reuben was, the frenzy of the Malay gave him greater power, and the lad felt he could not long retain his grip of the arm with which the Malay strove to use his kris. Help, however, was not long in coming. A native policeman ran up at full speed and brought his heavy club with his full force down on the head of the Malay.

The latter's limbs at once relaxed, and Reuben sprang to his feet breathless, but not seriously harmed, although the blood was flowing freely from some slight wounds he had received from the Malay's sharp-edged weapon.

As Reuben looked round upon gaining his feet, he saw Miss Hudson standing by the side of her companion, who had fallen fainting to the ground. Mr. Hudson and Captain Wilson, running at their full speed, were within a few paces of the girls. They had entered a shop to make a purchase while the ladies strolled on, and although they had rushed out on hearing the alarm, they were too far off to render assistance, and, impotent to help, had seen with horror the terrible death which threatened the ladies.

Frances Hudson had not uttered a word from the moment when the Malay rushed down upon them, but as her father came up she turned round and burst into tears as he clasped her in his arms.

Many of the bystanders gathered round Reuben, seized him by the hand, patting him on the shoulder,

and praising him for the courage with which he had faced the maddened savage. A minute later Mr. Hudson forced his way through the crowd. Miss Furley had already been raised and carried into a shop.

"Go in with her, my dear," Mr. Hudson said to his daughter; "I will bring him to you directly. My brave fellow!" he exclaimed as he made his way to Reuben and grasped his hand, "how can I thank you for saving my child's life? It was a noble deed, indeed. You are not badly hurt, I hope," he added, as he saw the blood streaming down Reuben's face and arm.

"Nothing to speak of, sir," Reuben replied, "at least, I think not; but I feel rather queer from this loss of blood. I had better get myself bandaged up." And indeed Reuben was turning very pale, partly from the relaxation of the tension of the struggle, partly, as he said, from loss of blood.

"Stand back!" Mr. Hudson cried; "don't press upon him, the lad is nearly fainting. One of you help me get him into a shop. Where is the nearest surgeon to be found?"

It was as much as Reuben could do to walk across the street, aided by his two supporters. A strong glass of Cape smoke, as the native spirit is called, and water revived him somewhat. It was some minutes before a surgeon arrived, for five persons had been terribly wounded and two killed by the Malay on his course, and the surgeons near were busily employed.

"Not very serious," the surgeon said as soon as he examined Reuben's wounds; "very different affairs from those I have just come from."

"I had hold of his hand," Reuben said, "so that he couldn't strike; they are only cuts he made in trying to get his arm free."

"That on your arm will not trouble you, though it has bled pretty freely; the one down your face is fortunately of no great consequence, except that it has cut down to the bone on the brow and cheek. If it had been an inch further back it would have severed the temporal artery. You have had a narrow escape of it. As it is, you will get off with a scar which may last for some time, but as it is an honourable one perhaps you won't so much care. However, I will bring it together as well as I can, and stitch it up, and it may not show much."

The wound was sewn up and then bandaged, as was that on the arm, the other and slighter wounds were simply drawn together by slips of plaster. When all was done, Reuben said to Mr. Hudson:

"I shall do very well now, sir. I am sure you must wish to go to Miss Hudson. I will sit here a bit longer and then go on board the ship."

"You will do nothing of the kind," Mr. Hudson said. "I have just sent for a vehicle, and you will come to the hotel and get into bed at once. You are not fit to stand now, but I hope a good night's rest will do you good." Reuben would have protested, but at this moment a vehicle arrived at the door, and with it Captain Wilson entered.

"I have just taken your daughter and Miss Furley to the hotel, Hudson," he said. "They are both greatly shaken and no wonder. So I thought it better to see them back before coming in to shake hands with our gallant young friend here."

"He has lost a good deal of blood, Wilson, and I am just taking him off to get him to bed in the hotel. So we won't do any thanking till the morning," Mr. Hudson said, seeing that Reuben's lip quivered and he was incapable of bearing any further excitement.

"Do you take one of his arms and I will take the other, and get him into that trap."

A quarter of an hour later Reuben was in bed at the hotel. Mr. Hudson brought him up a basin of clear soup; having drunk this he turned over and was in a very few minutes asleep. The captain and most of the other passengers were at the same hotel, and there was great excitement when the news arrived of the terrible danger the two girls had run. Mrs. Hudson had from her early life been accustomed to emergencies, and the instant the girls arrived she took them up to the room they shared between them and insisted upon their going at once to bed, after partaking of a cup of tea.

"What am I to do for this young fellow, Wilson?" Mr. Hudson asked, as, having seen his patient comfortably in bed, he returned downstairs and took a seat in the verandah by his fellow passenger. "I owe Frances' life to him, and there is nothing I wouldn't do for him. The question is what? One does not like to offer money to a man for such a service as this."

"No," Captain Wilson agreed, "especially in his case. I feel as deeply indebted to him as you do."

Mr. Hudson nodded. Only the evening before arriving at Cape Town Captain Wilson had spoken to him on the matter of his affection for his daughter, and had asked his permission to speak to Frances. They had known each other in the colony, but had not been intimate until thrown together on board the *Paramatta*. Seeing that she was an only child, and that her father was considered one of the wealthiest squatters in the colony, Captain Wilson had feared that Mr. Hudson would not approve of him as a suitor, and had therefore broached the subject to him before speaking to her. Mr. Hudson, however, had raised no objections.

"Yes," he said, "if it had been one of the sailors I could have set the matter right by drawing a big cheque, and I shouldn't have cared how big, but with this young fellow I do not quite see my way. However, I will shift the responsibility by leaving the matter in Frances' hands—women are much better hands at things of this sort that require a light touch than we are."

The passengers by the *Paramatta* were up early in the morning, for the ship was to sail at nine. But early as they were Reuben was before them, and on Mr. Hudson enquiring about him as he turned out he was informed that he had already gone on board the ship.

The two girls both looked pale when they came down to their early breakfast. Both declared, however, that they had slept well.

"You must give us time, dad, to get up our roses," Frances Hudson said in reply to her father's remarks as to their appearance. "I have no doubt a few days at sea will do it. I hear, that the young man that saved us has gone on board ship. Did you see him this morning?"

"No, my dear. I came downstairs only a minute or two before you did, and then found that he was gone."

"Have you thought over what you are going to do, dad, for him?"

"Wilson and I have talked it over, Frances, but at present we don't see our way. It is too serious a matter to make up our minds in a hurry. Your mother is in favour of giving him a handsome present, but I don't think myself that that would do. Men who will do such deeds as that are not the sort of men to be paid by money."

"Oh no, dad! surely not that. Any other possible way, but not money."

"No, my dear; so I thought. I have chatted it over with Wilson, and we have agreed that the best plan is to leave it entirely in your hands."

"I will think it over, dad," the girl said gravely. "It is a serious thing. We owe him our lives, and the least we can do is not to hurt his feelings by the way in which we try to show our gratitude."

Reuben had slept well, and on waking soon after daylight jumped at once out of bed, and was glad to feel that, except for a certain amount of weakness in the legs and stiffness in his wounds, he was all right again. He dressed quietly, and, as soon as he heard persons moving about in the hotel, made his way down to the shore and sat down there to wait for a boat from the ship, which was lying some distance out, and would, he was sure, be sending off early, as there would be many things to bring on board before she sailed.

It was not long before he saw the men descending the gangway to the boat alongside, which was soon rowing towards the shore. As she approached Reuben saw the steward and first mate sitting in the stern seats, and when the officer jumped ashore his eye fell on Reuben.

"Ah, Whitney," he said, "I am glad to see you about. When the captain came off last night he told me all about your gallant rescue of the two ladies. I am sorry to see you bandaged up so much. The captain said you had some nasty cuts, but I didn't think they were so bad."

"They are nothing to speak about, sir," Reuben replied, "although you would think so from seeing those bandages all over one side of the face and my arm in a sling; but they are no great depth and don't hurt to speak of. They were clean cuts with a sharp edge, and don't hurt half as much as many a knock I have had with a hammer."

"Well, we all feel proud of you, my lad. It isn't everyone who would face a Malay running amuck without weapons, I can tell you. Row Whitney back to the ship, lads, and come back again in an hour's time."

Reuben stepped into the boat, which at once pushed off. The boat ran up alongside the gangway, and Reuben was soon upon deck. He was there met by the captain, who had just come up as the boat rowed alongside. He shook Reuben's hand heartily.

"You are a fine young fellow, Whitney, and your mother, if you have one, ought to be proud of you; I should be if you were a son of mine. It was a lucky day for us all when I shipped you on board the *Paramatta*, for it would have been a heavy day for us if those two young ladies had been killed by that madman yesterday. You look pale, lad, as much as one can see of you, and you will have to lie by for a bit. I hear you lost a great deal of blood. Steward, bring another cup of cocoa with mine, a large one, and put plenty of milk in."

The captain insisted on Reuben coming to his cabin to drink his cocoa.

"You had best knock off your allowance of spirits till your wounds have healed up, lad. I will tell the second mate to serve you out port wine instead."

Reuben now went forward feeling very much the better for the cocoa. He again had to receive the hearty congratulations of the men, and then, rather to escape from this than because he felt he needed it, he turned into his bunk and was soon sound asleep. Three hours later he was awakened by the tramp of men overhead, and knew that they were shortening the anchor chain and preparing to be off. Going out on to the deck he saw that the courses had been dropped and the topsails were lying loose in their gaskets. The crew were singing merrily

as they worked the capstan. Three of the boats already hung from the davits, and two large boats were bringing off the passengers and were already within a hundred yards of the ship, while the remaining ship's boat, with the steward, crowded with fresh stores, was but a short way behind them. As soon as the passengers were up and the shore boats had left she came alongside.

"Hook on the falls at once," the first mate ordered, "and run her up as she is. You can get the things out afterwards."

The anchor was by this time under the foot.

"Up with it, lads!" and the sailors again started at full speed on the capstan. The jibs were run up, the courses and topsails shaken out and braced, and the *Paramatta* began to steal through the water again for the second portion of her voyage. Mr. Hudson and his friend very soon made their way forward, and the ship was scarcely under way when Reuben, who was gazing over the bulwark at the shore, felt a hand laid on his shoulder.

"How are you to-day, Reuben; better, I hope? It was too bad of you to run off in that way this morning."

"I am all right now, thank you, sir," Reuben answered. "I felt just a little shaky at first, but the captain gave me a cup of cocoa when I came on board, and I feel now as if I were fit for duty again."

"Oh, nonsense," Mr. Hudson exclaimed, "you mustn't think of work for days yet. No, you must come aft with me. My daughter and Miss Furley are most anxious to see you, and my wife, too, is longing to add her thanks to mine."

"You are very good, sir, but really I would rather not, if you will excuse me. It is horrid being thanked and

made a fuss about just because, on the spur of the moment, one did one's duty."

"That's all very well, Reuben, but you see it wouldn't be fair to my daughter. If anyone did you a great service you would want to thank them, would you not?"

"Yes, I suppose so, sir," Reuben answered reluctantly; "but really I hate it."

"I can understand your feelings, my lad, but you must make up your mind to do it. When anyone puts others under a vast obligation to him he must submit to be thanked, however much he may shrink from it. Come along, it will not be very dreadful."

Reuben saw that there was no getting out of it, and followed Mr. Hudson along the deck, feeling, however, more ashamed and uncomfortable even than he did when standing in the dock as a criminal. Captain Wilson walked beside him; hitherto he had not spoken but he now laid his hand quietly upon Reuben's shoulder.

"My lad," he said, "I am not a man to talk much, but believe me that henceforth I am your friend for life."

Reuben looked up with a little smile which showed that he understood. He had often, indeed, watched the young officer and Miss Hudson together, and had guessed that they were more than mere acquaintances.

The passengers were, with the exception of the three ladies, all gathered on the poop. But Frances had proposed to her mother that they should see Reuben in the cabin alone, as she felt that it would be a severe ordeal to the lad to be publicly thanked. Captain Wilson ascended to the poop and joined the others there, while Mr. Hudson went alone into the cabin. The three ladies were awaiting him there. Frances came forward first; the tears were standing in her eyes.

"You have saved my life," she said softly, "at the risk of your own, and I thank you with all my heart, not only for my own sake, but for that of my father and mother, who would have been childless to-day had it not been for you."

"I need no thanks, Miss Hudson," Reuben said quietly; his shyness had left him as he entered the cabin. "It will all my life be a source of pleasure and gratification to me that I have been able to have been of service to so bright and kind a lady."

"I am not less grateful," Miss Furley said, advancing also. "I shall never forget that dreadful moment, and the feeling which darted through my mind as you rushed past us and threw yourself upon him, and I felt that I was saved almost by a miracle."

"And you must accept my thanks also," Mrs. Hudson said—"the thanks of a mother whose child you have saved from so dreadful a death. Believe me that there is nothing that my husband or myself would not do to show how deeply and sincerely we are grateful to you."

Reuben briefly answered Miss Furley and Mrs. Hudson; and Mr. Hudson, feeling that the lad would rather get over the scene as soon as possible, slipped his arm through his and said:

"Now, Reuben, you must just come up for a minute on the poop. The other passengers are all waiting to shake you by the hand, and they would not forgive me if I were to let you run off, as I know you are wanting to do, without a word."

Accordingly Reuben was taken up to the poop, where the passengers all shook hands with him and congratulated him upon his courage.

"Now, I suppose I can go, sir," he said with a smile to Mr. Hudson when this was over.

"Yes, you can go now," Mr. Hudson laughed. "Most young fellows at your age would be glad of an opportunity for figuring as a hero, but you talk as if it was one of the most painful businesses imaginable."

"Anyhow, I am glad it's over, Mr. Hudson, I can assure you; and now I think I will turn in again. Considering what a night I had I feel wonderfully sleepy."

It was not until the sun was setting that Reuben appeared again on deck. Shortly after he did so Captain Wilson strolled up to the place where he was standing.

"I wish, Reuben," he said, after a few remarks on other subjects, "that you would tell me a little more about yourself. You understand that I do not ask from mere inquisitiveness; but after what has happened, you see, we seem to have got into close relationship with each other, and if I knew more about you I could the easier see in what way I could most really be useful to you out there. Are you what you appear to be?"

"I am, indeed," Reuben replied with a smile. "My history is a very simple one. My father was a miller with a good business, and, up to the age of ten, it did not appear that I should ever be working as a craftsman for my living. Unhappily at that time my father slipped, one night, into the millpond and was drowned; and when his affairs came to be wound up it was found that he had speculated disastrously in wheat, and that, after paying all claims, there was nothing left. My mother took a little village shop and I went to the village school. At first I think I did not work very hard, but, fortunately, there was a change in masters, and the new one turned out one of the best friends a boy ever had. He pushed me on greatly, and when I was apprenticed to a millwright he urged me to continue my education by working of an

evening. I stuck to it hard, and with his help learned, therefore, a good deal more than was usual in my station of life."

"And is your mother alive?"

"Yes, sir."

"But how came you to think of emigrating at your age, when, indeed, you cannot have served out your full time?"

"That, sir," Reuben said gravely, "I cannot tell you. Some day, perhaps, if you care to know, I may bring myself to do so. I may say that it was a serious matter, but that I was really in no way to blame, whatever people may think. My conscience is absolutely clear, and yet I would rather that the story, which I left England to escape, should not be known to anyone."

"I do not seek to know further, Reuben. I think I know enough of you to be perfectly sure that you would do nothing that was wrong, and I am perfectly willing to take your word in the matter. However, I am glad that you have told me as much as you have. You have no objection, I hope, to my repeating your story to Mr. Hudson, who is as much interested in you as I am. And now another thing. I know that it is painful to him that one to whom he is so indebted should be forward here in the fore-castle instead of being in the cabin. He was afraid of hurting your feelings by speaking to you about it, but I know that it would be a great relief and pleasure to him and Mrs. Hudson if you would allow them to make an arrangement with the captain that, for the remainder of the voyage, you should be a passenger."

"I am much obliged to them," Reuben said quietly; "but I could not think of accepting such an offer. I am working my way out independently, sir, and I owe no one anything. I am really enjoying the passage, and so

far there has been no hardship worth speaking of. Even putting aside the fact that I should not like to accept an obligation which would to most people look like a payment for the service I was fortunate enough to be able to render to Mr. Hudson, I should feel out of my element. I am very comfortable and get on very well with the men."

"Then we will say no more about it," Captain Wilson said. "It would have been a pleasure both to me and the Hudsons to have you aft, and I am sure you would be well received by all the passengers. However, as you think you would not be comfortable, we will let the matter drop. However, as to your work in the colony, we must have a say in that; and I hope that when I thoroughly understand your wishes we shall be able to help you forward there."

"For that I shall be extremely obliged, sir. It would be a great thing indeed for anyone on landing to have gentlemen ready to assist him and push him forward. This is so at home, and is of course still more the case in a strange country. I am very anxious to get on, and am ready to work my hardest to deserve any kindness that may be shown me."

"Well, we shall have plenty of time to think it over before we arrive."

CHAPTER VI

TWO OFFERS

THE weather continued favourable, and without further adventure the *Paramatta* arrived off Sydney heads, having made the voyage in a hundred and three days, which was, under the circumstances a quick one.

The last evening Captain Wilson asked Reuben to go with him to the poop, as he and Mr. Hudson wanted to have a chat with him.

"Now, Reuben," Mr. Hudson said, "sit yourself down here; we must have a talk together. Now we want to know exactly what you are thinking of doing."

"I am thinking of getting work, sir," Reuben said, "at my own trade."

"Well, my lad, I don't think you will make much at that. There are mills, of course, but not a great many of them, and I fancy you would find it difficult to get anything like regular work. The distances here are tremendous, and you would spend the money you made in one job in looking out for another. That is the first view of the case. The second is, that neither Captain Wilson nor I mean to let you try it. You have saved my daughter's life, and I am not going to let the man who did that tramp about the country looking for a day's work. Captain Wilson is going to marry my girl shortly, and of course he feels just the same about it. So the next question is, What is the best thing we can do for you? Now, if you have a fancy for squatting you can come with me up country and learn the business, and this day twelvemonth I will hand you over the deeds of a range

with five thousand sheep upon it. Now, that's my offer. Now, don't you be in a hurry to refuse it, and don't let me have any nonsense about your not liking to accept it. Ten such farms would not pay the debt I owe you, and I tell you I should think it downright mean if you were to refuse to let me pay you a part of my debt. Now you shall hear Wilson's proposal."

"My offer is not so brilliant, Reuben. Indeed, as far as making money, the pay would probably be no higher at first than you might earn at your trade. I am, as you know, assistant-superintendent to the constabulary force of the colony. Now, if you like I will obtain you a commission as an inspector. The pay is not high, but by good conduct you may rise to a position such as I hold. The life is full of excitement and adventure. Now, what do you say?"

Reuben was silent for a minute or two.

"I am greatly obliged to you both," he said, "more obliged than I can tell you. Your offer, Mr. Hudson, is a most generous one; but I have not been accustomed to farming, and I would rather have such a life as that which Captain Wilson offers me, although the pay may be very much smaller. But, sir," he said, turning to the officer of constabulary, "I fear that I cannot accept your offer. I had never intended to have spoken of it, and I came out to Australia in order that I might be away from everyone who knew the story, but I couldn't accept your offer without your knowing it. I am leaving England because I have been tried for burglary."

"Nonsense!" both Reuben's listeners exclaimed incredulously.

"If you don't mind I will tell you the whole story," Reuben said, "and then you can judge for yourselves."

Reuben then related at length the whole circumstances, with which the reader is already acquainted.

"I remember reading your story in the papers, Reuben," Captain Wilson said. "I own I was puzzled at the time, because, you see, I did not know you, but how anyone who did know you could think you guilty passes my comprehension."

"I call it infamous," Mr. Hudson added warmly. "They must be a pack of fools down at that place Lewes."

"Well," Captain Wilson said, "I am glad you have told me your story, for I have all along been puzzled as to what made you give up your trade and emigrate at your age. However, the matter is explained now; but now you have told me I see no reason whatever why you should not accept my offer. In the first place, no one but ourselves will know your history; in the next, if they did so that is no reason why you should not hold the appointment. You have been acquitted by a jury of your countrymen; and even did everyone know it, no one dare throw it in your teeth. No, I repeat, if you like I have no doubt that I can obtain for you an appointment as officer in the constabulary. You need not give me an answer now, think it over for a week; you will have plenty of time, for Mr. Hudson insists upon your taking up your abode with him when you land."

"That I do," Mr. Hudson said. "I have a place a mile out of Sydney, and there you will stop for a bit. Then I hope you will go up the country with me for a month or two and learn the ways of the place, till Captain Wilson has got an appointment for you, that is, if you quite decide to accept his offer instead of mine; but, remember, if ever you get tired of thief-hunting the offer will still be open to you."

Sydney was at that time but a very small place, for the great wave of emigrants had not yet begun to flow, and the colony was in its early infancy. As soon as the vessel cast anchor Mr. Hudson and his party landed, taking Reuben with them, and an hour later he found himself installed as a guest at the squatter's house.

It was large and comfortable, surrounded by a broad verandah, and standing in a garden blooming with flowers, many of which were wholly unknown to Reuben. He had, of course, before landing laid aside the suit he had worn on board ship, and had dressed himself in his best, and the heartiness and cordiality of his host, his wife, and daughter soon made him feel perfectly at his ease.

"We are in the rough, you know," Mr. Hudson said to him, "everyone is in the rough here at present. Twenty years hence things may settle down, but now we all have to take them as we find them. The chief difficulty is servants. You see, almost every other man here is either a convict, an ex-convict, or a runaway sailor. The number of emigrants who come out is small. For the most part they have a little money and take up land, or at any rate go up country and look for work there. I have been exceptionally lucky. The man who carried the things upstairs just now, and who is my chief man here, is an ex-convict."

Reuben looked surprised.

"He was assigned to me when he first got his ticket-of-leave. I found him a good hand, and he stood by me pluckily when my station was attacked by the blacks. His time was out some years ago, but that has made no difference. Nothing would induce him to leave me, and I would not part with him for any amount."

"Dinner is ready," Frances Hudson said, running into the room.

"I won't be a minute, Frances. Ah, here comes Wilson. I was wondering what had become of him; he promised to come on as soon as he had seen his chief."

The dinner was an excellent one. All were in high spirits with the exception of Mrs. Hudson, who was cool in her manners to the young officer, and was evidently desirous of showing her disapproval of his engagement to her daughter, which had only taken place two days before.

"I have news for you, Reuben," Captain Wilson said in the first pause of conversation. "I saw the chief and told him I wanted an appointment for a young friend of mine who had come out in the *Paramatta*, and who had shown great pluck and presence of mind in an affair at the Cape, which I described to him. He said that he could appoint you at once, as young Houghton, a district superintendent, was killed three weeks ago in an affair with the bushrangers up country. He said he was very glad to hear of someone likely to make a good officer to fill his place. So if you make up your mind to be a constable, the place is ready for you."

"Thank you very much, sir," Reuben said, "I was thinking the matter over last night, and quite made up my mind to accept the place you were kind enough to offer me, if you think me fit to fill it."

"I have no fear on that score, Reuben; I am sure you will do me credit to my recommendation. So then we may consider that as settled."

"There," grumbled Mr. Hudson, "that's just like you, Wilson; you upset all my plans. It was arranged he was to come up to my station, and there, before you are on shore two hours, you arrange the whole business, and I suppose you will be wanting him to get into his uniform and be off before a week's out."

"I dare say we can manage a fortnight," Captain Wilson laughed, "and I have no doubt he will have plenty of opportunities for visiting you later on. Indeed, I don't know why he should not be able to look you up as soon as you get there. He will, of course, be placed under an old hand for six months to learn his duties and get to speak a little of the native lingo. Hartwell, who has your district, is as good a man as he can be put with. He is a careful officer, though perhaps a little slow, but he will be a good man for Reuben to serve under, and I know the chief will put him with him if I ask him, as it can't make any difference where he goes first."

"Well, if you can arrange that, Wilson, I will forgive you. And now, where are you going to?"

"For the time I am not going anywhere in particular," Captain Wilson replied. "The chief says he thinks that things have got rather slack since I have been away. There are several bands of bushrangers who have been doing a deal of mischief up country; so, to begin with, he wishes me to make a tour of inspection and to report generally. After that I think I shall be settled here for a time, at any rate it will be my headquarters. I think it probable the chief himself will be going home on leave before very long."

"The sooner you are settled here the better," Mr. Hudson said, "for I know I shall get no peace now till Frances is settled, too. Ever since she was a child when she once made up her mind that she wanted a new toy she worried me till I got it for her, and you are the last new toy."

"Oh, papa, how can you say so?" Frances said, laughing and colouring.

"You take my advice, Reuben," Mr. Hudson said, "don't you go and lose your heart, for if you once do

there's a police officer spoiled. It don't so much matter with Wilson, because he has done his share of dangerous work and is pretty well up at the top of the tree; but a man that has to tackle bushrangers and blacks ought not to have a woman at home thinking of him."

"There is no fear of that for a good many years to come," Reuben laughed. "Are these blacks really formidable fellows, Captain Wilson?"

"Formidable to the settlers," Captain Wilson said, "but not to us. They drive off cattle and sheep, and sometimes attack solitary stations and murder every soul there; but they seldom stand up in fair fight when we come down upon them, but they fight hard sometimes when they are acting with bushrangers."

"Bushrangers are mostly escaped convicts, are they not?"

"Almost always," Captain Wilson replied, "except that, of course, they have among them a few men such as runaway sailors, and ne'er-do-wells who get sick of shepherding and take to the bush; but the great proportion are convicts. It is not to be wondered at when you look at the life many of these men have led at home, and the monotony and hardship of their lives in many of the up-country stations, allotted to men as ignorant and sometimes almost as brutal as themselves.

"Some of them, too, escape from the road gangs, and these are generally the worst, for, as often as not, they may have killed a warder in making their escape, and know that it will go hard with them if they are caught. It may be said that there are two sorts of bushrangers. The one are men who have taken to the bush simply from a desire of regaining their liberty. Sometimes they join parties of blacks and live with them; sometimes two or three get together, and all the harm they do is to carry

off an occasional sheep for food; and the other kind are desperadoes—men who were a scourge in England and are a scourge here, who attack lonely stations, and are not content with robbing, but murder those who fall into their hands. They are not easy to hunt down, their instinct having made them wary; and being generally in league with the blacks, who are as cunning as foxes and can run pretty nearly as fast as a horse can gallop, they are kept very well informed as to our movements, and, the country being so immense, we should never run them down were it not for our native trackers.

"These fellows are to the full as sharp as the Red Indians of North America. They seem, in fact, to have the instinct of dogs, and can follow a track when the keenest white's eye cannot detect the smallest trace of a footprint. It is something marvellous what some of them will do."

"Have you many of these trackers in your employment?"

"There are one or two attached to every up-country station. They are, in fact, our bloodhounds, and although some of our men pick up a little of their craft, we should do nothing without them."

The next morning Reuben met Captain Wilson down in Sydney, and was taken by him to the chief of the constabulary, who at once made out his appointment. On his return Mr. Hudson again started with him for the town and insisted upon ordering his equipment.

As Reuben saw that he would be hurt by any shadow of denial he accepted Mr. Hudson's kind offer, although he had intended to ask Captain Wilson to make an advance of pay in order that he might get what was necessary. He could not, however, have purchased such an outfit as Mr. Hudson insisted on getting for him, the latter ordering not only uniforms but suits of plain

clothes, together with saddlery, holsters, a sword, and a brace of excellent double-barrelled pistols. He did not need to buy a horse, having in his stables one in every way suitable, being at once quiet and fast.

"You will have to keep your eyes open, Reuben," he said as he gave him the horse, "or he will be stolen from you. These bushranger fellows are always well mounted, and anyone at an up-country station, who has an animal at all out of the ordinary way, has to keep his stable door locked and sleep with one eye open; and even then the chances are strongly in favour of his losing his horse before long. These fellows know that their lives often depend upon the speed of their horse, and, naturally, spare no pains to get hold of a good one. Ah, I have a good idea. Jim," he shouted to one of the black boys, "come here."

The lad, who was about eighteen years of age, trotted up.

"Jim, this gentleman is going to be a police officer, and he's going to take the bay with him; now he wants a good servant. Will you go with him?"

The lad looked longingly at the horse, which he had groomed and was very fond of; but he shook his head.

"I no leave Massa Hudson."

"Yes, but I wish you to go, Jim. This gentleman is a great friend of mine, and when bad black man attacked young Missy he saved her life. So I want him to be taken good care of, and the horse too, and to see no one steals it. So someone I can trust must go with him. If you don't like him for a master after you have tried him, Jim, you can come back to me again."

The lad looked at Reuben gravely with his small eyes deeply sunken under the projecting eyebrows.

"Jim will go," he said; "he look after white man and Tartar to please Massa Hudson and young Missy."

"That's right, Jim," his employer said.

"That's a good stroke of business," he went on as he turned away with Reuben; "if you treat these black fellows well and they get attached to you they are faithful to death. You will see that fellow will never let your horse out of his sight. If you ride twenty miles across country there he will be by your side as you dismount, ready to take it and looking as fresh as paint. At night he will sleep in the stable, and will be ready at all times and places to make a fire and cook a damper or a bit of meat, if you are lucky enough to have one by you."

A fortnight later Reuben, in his uniform as an officer of the constabulary, rode out of Sydney. His baggage had been sent on three days before by a wagon returning up country. Jim trotted with an easy stride behind him. Reuben at first was inclined to ride slowly in order to give his attendant time to keep up with him; but he soon found that whatever pace he went the lad kept the same distance behind without any apparent exertion, and he was, therefore, able to choose his own pace without reference to Jim's comfort.

Four years passed. Reuben Whitney gave every satisfaction to his superiors, and was considered a zealous and effective young officer. So far he had not been placed in a position of great responsibility; for, although for the last two years he had been in charge of a district, it was not far from Sydney, and his duties consisted principally in hunting for convicts who had made their escape, in looking after refractory ticket-of-leave men, and in ordinary constabulary work. He had learned in that time to become a first-rate rider and a good shot with a pistol,

accomplishments which would be of vital service when he was ordered to an up-country station.

At the end of the four years' service he received a letter from Captain Wilson, who had just succeeded to the chief command of the constabulary, ordering him to hand over charge of the district to the young officer who was the bearer of the letter, and to report himself at headquarters.

Reuben was now nearly three-and-twenty, and had grown into a very powerful young man. A life spent for the most part on horseback had hardened his muscles and filled out his frame. He stood about five feet nine, but he looked shorter owing to his great width of shoulders. He was still quiet in manner, but he had the same bright and pleasant expression which had characterized him as a boy, and his visits to Sydney, where he was introduced by Captain Wilson and Mr. Hudson into the best society, had given him ease and self-possession.

The native, Jim, was still with him. He had become greatly attached to his master, and his fidelity and devotion had been of the greatest service to him, and go where he would the black was always at his heels.

On his presenting himself at Sydney Captain Wilson said after the first greetings:

"I know you have been a little disappointed, Reuben, because hitherto you have been at stations where you have had but little opportunity of distinguishing yourself. However, I thought better to keep you at quiet work until you were thoroughly master of your duties, and had, moreover, got your full strength. I don't know whether you have quite arrived at that yet, but I think you will do anyhow," and he smiled as he looked at Reuben's shoulders.

"I think I am as strong as most of them," Reuben said,

smiling too. "Four years' millwright's work, and four years on horseback in this bracing air ought to make one strong, if there's anything in one to begin with. I think I shall do in that respect."

"I think so, Reuben. And now to business. You have heard of that affair of Inspector Thomas in the Goora district—it was a bad business. He and two of his men were out after some natives who had driven off his cattle, and he was set upon by a party of bushrangers, and he and his men killed."

"So I heard, sir," Reuben said quietly.

"Well, I have decided in sending you up in his place. It is a bad district—the worst we have at present—and it needs a man of great resolution and intelligence. I am sure that you have plenty of both, and that I cannot make a better choice than in sending you there. Your age is the only thing against you—not with me, you know, but others may think that I have done wrong in selecting so young an officer; but, you see, I know my man. I know, too, that several of the inspectors are getting too old for this sort of work; I do not mean too old, perhaps, in point of years, but they are married men with families, and for desperate work I prefer men without encumbrances. The post should be held by an inspector, but I cannot promote you at present, it would be putting you over the heads of too many; but you will have a good chance of earning early promotion, and I know that is what you like."

"Thank you very much, Captain Wilson. I will do my best to show myself worthy of your confidence."

"You will have all your work cut out for you, Reuben. The district has all along been a most troublesome one. The number of settlers at present is small. There is a good deal of higher bush than usual about it, which makes

it very difficult to run these fellows down, and the natives are specially troublesome. Besides which, at present there are two or three of the worst gangs of bushrangers in the colony somewhere in that country. You will have to be cautious as well as bold, Reuben. It is a dangerous service I am sending you on; still, the more danger the more credit to you."

"You could not have given me a station I should have liked better, and I hope ere long I may be able to give you a good account of the bushrangers."

"And now, Reuben, if you will call again in an hour, I shall be free, and then I will drive you home. You need not start for a day or two, and you will, of course, stay with me till you do."

CHAPTER VII

AN UP-COUNTRY DISTRICT

Mrs. WILSON received Reuben as usual with the greatest cordiality, but she exclaimed loudly when she heard that he was going to the Goora district:

"You don't mean it, George. You can't mean that you are going to send Reuben to that dreadful place. Why, we are always hearing of murders and robberies there; and you know the last inspector was killed, and the one before recalled because you said he had lost his nerve, and now you are sending Reuben there!"

"But I look upon it as the greatest honour, Mrs. Wilson, being chosen for such a station; and, you see, there will be capital chances of distinguishing myself and getting promoted."

"And capital chances of being killed," Mrs. Wilson said in a vexed tone. "I do call it too bad, George."

"But, my dear, we want a man of pluck and energy. Besides, you know, we have been getting into hot water over that district. The press have been saying very severe things about our incompetence to protect the outlying settlements, and I was obliged to choose a man who will give satisfaction; and you will agree with me that Reuben will do that."

"Of course he will," Mrs. Wilson agreed, "I shouldn't be alive now if he hadn't had plenty of pluck and energy; but for that very reason you ought not to send him to such a dangerous post."

"But I wish to give him an opportunity for distinguishing himself. I can't promote him over the heads of some eight or ten men senior to him, unless he does something a little out of the way."

"Well, I don't like it, George. I tell you frankly. I always thought he was wrong to go into the constabulary at all instead of accepting papa's offer. I can't think why you men are so fond of fighting, when you could choose a quiet and comfortable life."

Two days afterwards Reuben left for his new command. It took him eight days to reach it. His headquarters were at Goora, a settlement of some twenty houses besides the barracks in which the constabulary force, consisting of a sergeant, eighteen constables, and two native trackers, were quartered. The sergeant, a north-country Irishman named O'Connor, was somewhat surprised when Reuben rode up to the station, for the officers previously in command had been much older men. Reuben's own quarters were in a cottage close to the main building, and he asked the sergeant to come in the evening.

"Now, sergeant," he said after a little preliminary

talk, "I have been sent up by Captain Wilson with instructions to root out these bands of bushrangers."

The sergeant smiled grimly.

"We have been doing our best for the last three years, sir, but we have not made much of a hand at it."

"No," Reuben agreed, "and I don't suppose, of course, that I am going to succeed all at once. In the first place, tell me frankly what sort of men have we got?"

"The men are good enough, sir, but they have certainly got disheartened lately. One way and another we have lost something like ten men in the last two years; and, of course, that last affair with poor Mr. Thomas was a bad one."

"I understand," Reuben said quietly, "some of them are not quite so eager to meet the bushrangers as they used to be."

"Well, that is perhaps about it, sir; but I must say the men have been tremendously hardly worked—pretty nigh night and day in the saddle, often called out by false news to one end of the district, and then to find when they return that those scoundrels have been down playing their games at some station at the other end. It's enough to dishearten a man."

"So it is, sergeant. I was speaking to Captain Wilson about it, and saying, that if we are to succeed we ought to have some fresh hands, who will take up the work with new spirit. We are seven below our force at present, and he has promised to send me up fifteen new hands, so there will be eight to be relieved. I will leave it to you to pick out the men to go. Mind, put it to them that they are to be relieved simply because Captain Wilson thinks they have had their share of hard work, and should therefore be sent to a quiet station for a time. Just pick out the men whom you think would be most pleased to go."

"Very well, sir. I am glad to hear the news, for to tell you the truth I do think we want a little fresh blood amongst us."

Three days later the new detachment arrived, and Reuben saw at once that Captain Wilson had chosen a picked set of young men. About half of them were freshly enlisted to the force, the others had all been employed at up-country stations, and were well acquainted with the nature of the work before them. The same afternoon the eight men picked out by Sergeant O'Connor as being the least useful on the station started for Sydney.

Reuben found that there were in the office a great many letters from settlers asking for protection. It was impossible to comply with all these, but after consultation with O'Connor he sent five parties of three men each to as many exposed stations, keeping ten in hand to move as required. Taking Jim and two of the constables who had been longest on the station, he spent two months in traversing his district from end to end, and making himself thoroughly acquainted with its geographical features.

For a time the outrages had ceased, the bushrangers having shifted their quarters and the natives withdrawn after the murder of the late inspector. This was a great relief to Reuben, as it permitted him to gain an insight into the country before setting to work in earnest. Upon his tour he and his followers were everywhere most hospitably received at the stations at which they halted. Everywhere he heard the same tale of sheep killed, cattle and horses driven off, and the insolent demeanour of the natives.

"I was thinking of giving it up and moving back into the more populated districts," one of the settlers said to Reuben; "but now you have come I will hold on for a bit longer and see how it turns out. You look to me the

right sort of fellow for the post, but the difficulty is with such a large scattered district as yours to be everywhere at once. What I have often thought of is, that it would be a good thing if the whole district were to turn out and go right into the heart of the black country and give them a lesson."

"From what I hear," Reuben said, "it will be next to impossible for us to find them. The country is so vast and covered with bush that there would be no searching it."

"Yes, that is true," the settler said. "I suppose it couldn't be done. But it's anxious work sleeping here night after night with one's rifle by one's bedside, never certain at what hour one may be woke by the yelling of the blacks. But they are not as bad as the bushrangers. If the blacks can but drive off your cattle they are contented; you have got nothing else that is much use to them. The bushrangers don't want your cattle beyond a head or two for present use; but they want everything else you've got, and, whether you like it or not is quite immaterial to them."

Three days after his return from his last visit of inspection of his district, a settler rode at full speed up to the station.

"Captain," he said—for although Reuben had no right to that title he was always so called by the settlers—"the blacks have been down at my place. They have killed my two shepherds and driven off the sheep."

"Sergeant O'Connor, turn out the men at once," Reuben shouted. "See that their ammunition is all right, and let each man take a waterskin and four days' provisions in his haversack. When was it?" he asked, turning to the settler again.

"Some time yesterday afternoon—at least I judge

so. One of the men was to have come in for supplies, and when night came and he hadn't come in I began to be afraid something was wrong, for I knew that they were getting short, so this morning at daybreak I rode out with the hands I have about the house. We could see nothing of the sheep, so we rode straight to the men's hut. There, lying some twenty yards away, was the body of one of the men riddled with spear holes. He had evidently been running to the hut for shelter when he was overtaken. I did not stop to look for the other, for no doubt he had been killed too."

"Well, we will do what we can for you," Reuben said. "I will be ready in five minutes." He ran into the house, buckled on his sword, put some cold meat and a small bag of flour into his haversack, together with some dampers Jim had just cooked, and then went out again. Jim had already brought his horse round to the door.

By this time the sergeant and ten men were in the saddle, and placing himself at their head, with the settler, whose name was Blount, he rode off at full speed, followed by his men, the two native trackers, and Jim. Reuben soon reined the horse in.

"It will not do to push them too hard at first, there is no saying how far we shall have to go."

"Do you mean to follow them into their own country?" Mr. Blount asked.

"I do," Reuben said. "I will follow them till I catch them, if I have to go across Australia."

"That's the sort," Mr. Blount said. "I expect you will find half a dozen other fellows at my station by the time you get there. I sent my hand off on horseback to the stations near to tell them what had taken place, and that I had ridden off to you, and asking them to come round."

"How far is it?" Reuben asked.

"About forty miles."

"But your horse will never be able to do it," Reuben said.

"I got a fresh horse at a friend's four miles from your station, so I am all right."

"They will have more than a day's start of us," Reuben remarked presently.

"Yes; thirty-six hours, for you will have to stop at my place to-night. But they can't travel very fast with sheep, you know."

It was late in the afternoon before they arrived at Mr. Blount's station. They found fourteen or fifteen of the neighbouring settlers gathered there.

"Glad to see you, captain, but I am afraid you are too late," said Dick Caister, a young settler whose station lay about twelve miles away.

"That remains to be proved," Reuben replied as he dismounted.

"Oh, they have got twenty-four hours' start, and it's too late to do anything to-night. They must be thirty miles away in the bush already."

"If they were a hundred I would follow them," Reuben said.

There was an exclamation of surprise and something like a cheer on the part of some of the younger men.

"The difficulties are very great," one of the elder settlers said. "There is neither food nor water to be found in the bush."

"I know it's not an easy business," Reuben said quietly. "But as to food, we can carry it with us; as to water, there must be water in places, for the natives can no more go without drinking water than we can. There must be streams and water-holes here and there. But, however difficult it is, I mean to attempt it. And now,

gentlemen, before we go further I want to say this: I know that you are all ready to help, but at the same time I would point out to you that it is likely enough that the bushrangers, who certainly work with the blacks, will follow up this stroke, therefore it will not do to leave the stations defenceless. I do not want a large force with me. Therefore I would urge upon all of you who are married men that it is of the first importance that you should stay at home, in case the bushrangers take the opportunity of our being away to pay you a visit. If any of the others like to go with us I shall be very glad of their assistance. We may be away for a week or more for aught I know."

There was a chorus of approval. Eight of those present were married men, and, though reluctant to give up the thought of punishing the blacks, they were yet glad that they were not called upon to leave their wives and families. With many good wishes for the success of the expedition, they at once mounted and rode off to their respective stations.

"Now for ways and means," Reuben said. "What spare horses have you, Mr. Blount?"

"I have only two besides the one I am riding."

"I should like to take at least six."

"It would be a good thing to have a few with us," one of the young men said. "My place is only six miles off, I will ride over and bring back three with me."

Reuben thought the plan was a good one, whereupon two of the others also volunteered to ride over and fetch the one three and the other two horses.

The three settlers rode off at once and returned late at night with the spare horses. They had not been idle at Mr. Blount's. A bullock had been killed and cut up, and a considerable portion cooked, so that each of the

twenty men going on the expedition would start with ten pounds of cooked meat.

As soon as day broke the party were in their saddles. Mr. Blount led them first to the hut near which he had found his shepherd killed. The native trackers now took up the search; the body of the other shepherd was found a half mile away. It was in a sitting position by a tree; the skull was completely smashed in by the blow of a waddy, and it was evident that a native had crept up behind him and killed him before he was conscious that any danger was at hand. The trackers were not long in finding the place where the sheep had been collected together and driven off, and a broad track of trampled grass showed clearly enough the direction which had been taken.

"How many of the black fellows do you think there were?" Reuben asked one of the trackers.

"Great many black fellow, captain," he replied.

"What do you call a great many?" Reuben asked.

"Twenty, thirty, captain; can't say how many."

"I tink dere are more dan thirty black fellow," Jim said to Reuben as they started; "quite a crowd of dem. Me no much like those two black fellow," and he nodded towards the trackers who were running on ahead, "no good those fellows."

"What makes you think that, Jim?"

"Two days ago Jim saw dem talking wid black fellow half a mile from the station, not know Jim saw dem; secret sort of talk. Why dey never find de tracks before black fellows and bushrangers always get away? Jim tink those fellows no good."

"Very good, Jim, you keep your eye on those fellows, I will do the same; we shall soon find out if they are up to any tricks."

Jim had been running by his master's stirrup while

this conversation had been going on, and he now dropped into his usual place at the rear of the party. For some miles the trail was followed at a hand-gallop, for the grass was several inches in height, and the trail could be followed as easily as a road. The country then began to change, the ground was poorer and more arid, and clumps of low brush grew here and there. Still there was no check in the speed. The marks made by the frightened flock were plain enough even to the horsemen, and bits of wool left behind on the bushes afforded an unmistakable testimony to their passage.

"They were not going so fast here," Mr. Blount said after dismounting and examining; "the footprints do not go in pairs as they did at first, the flock has broken into a trot. Ah! there is the first ahead."

In a hundred yards they came upon the skin and head of a sheep, nothing else remained. Unable to keep up with the flock it had been speared, cut up, and eaten raw by the blacks. In the next mile they came upon the remains of two more, then the track widened out and the footprints were scattered and confused. The horses were reined up and Jim and the trackers examined the ground. Jim returned in a minute or two.

"Black fellows give 'em a rest here; could no go any further; lie down and pant."

One of the trackers then came up.

"They stop here, captain, five six hours till moon rise; make fire, kill sheep, and have feast."

Reuben and some of the settlers rode over to the spot to which the tracker pointed.

"Confound them!" Blount exclaimed, "look there! there are at least twenty heads."

"So there are," Reuben said; "there must have been a lot of natives."

After five minutes' halt the ride was continued for the next three hours, then three dead sheep were passed. This time the flesh had not been devoured, but the poor beasts had in every case been speared.

"Savage brutes!" Reuben exclaimed; "they might at least have given the sheep a chance of life when they could go no further, instead of wantonly slaughtering them."

"That's their way always," Mr. Blount said; "they kill from pure mischief and love of slaughter, even when they don't want the meat."

Another five miles and they came upon a river. The wet season was only just over, and the river was full from bank to bank. It was some thirty yards wide, and from two to three feet deep. A score of sheep lay dead in the water. They had apparently rushed headlong in to quench their thirst, and had either drunk till they fell, or had been trampled under water by their companions pressing upon them from behind.

For the next ten miles the track was plain enough, then they came to a series of downs covered with a short grass. At the foot of these another long halt had been made by the blacks.

"We must have come twenty-five miles," Reuben said.

"Quite that, captain; the flock must have been dead beat by the time they got here. I should think they must have stopped here last night; we will soon see—there is one of their fire places."

The settler dismounted and put his hand into the ashes.

"Yes," he said, "they are warm still; they must have camped here last night, they started when the moon rose, no doubt. Thus they have eight or nine hours' start of us only, and as they can't travel fast after such a journey

as they had yesterday, we ought to be able to catch them long before night."

"Well, at any rate," Reuben said, "we will give our horses a couple of hours' rest. It is just eleven o'clock now, and I should think everyone is ready for a meal." There was a chorus of assent. The troop dismounted at once. The girths were loosened, the bits taken from the horses' mouths, and they were turned loose to graze in the long grass at the foot of the hill. Some of the men set to to cut brush, and in a few minutes a fire was lighted. One of the sheep, of which there were several lying about, was skinned and cut up, and slices on skewers of green wood were soon frizzling over the fire.

Twenty minutes later the water in a large pot hanging over the fire was boiling. Three or four handfuls of tea were thrown in; and with the fried mutton, cold damper, and tea a hearty meal was made. Then pipes were produced and lighted, while several of the men, lying down and shading their faces with their broad hats, indulged in a doze.

"One o'clock," Reuben said at last, looking at his watch. "It is time to be moving again."

The horses were fetched in, the bridles replaced, and the girths tightened.

"Now, which way?" Reuben asked the trackers.

"Along here, captain, by de foot of de hill de trail is plain enough."

It was so. A track of some width was trampled in the grass.

Reuben was about to give the order to proceed when he caught Jim's eye, and saw that the black wished to speak to him privately.

"What is it, Jim?" he asked, going apart from the rest.

"That not de way, captain. A hundred, two hundred

sheep gone that way wid four or five black fellow; de rest have all gone over de hill."

"Are you sure, Jim?"

"Mc quite sure, sar; de ground very hard; but while de captain smoke him pipe Jim went over de hill, saw plenty sign of sheep. Went straight uphill and then turned away to de left. Dis little party here hab only gone to frow white man off de trail."

"The trackers ought to have seen that as well as you Jim," Reuben said angrily.

"Dey see, sar, sure enough. Don't say, sar, Jim told you. If you say dat, put 'em on their guard. Massa ride along the trail for a bit just as if talk wid Jim about odder affair, den after little way begin to talk about trail being too small, den turn and come back here and go over de hill."

"A very good idea, Jim. I will do as you say."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLACK FELLOWS

A FEW minutes after his conversation with Jim the party started, following the broad track through the grass along the foot of the hill.

Reuben informed Mr. Blount of what Jim had told him.

"By Jove, I think he is right," the settler said. "The track is as broad as it was, but it is nothing like so much trampled down; but if your fellow says the main body have gone over the hill, why are you following this track?"

Reuben gave his reasons.

"I will call to them in a minute or two and tell them that it is your opinion that only a small portion of the flock have come this way. Then we will have a consultation, and no doubt some of your friends will notice that the ground is not much trampled. Then we will decide to ride back to the point from which we started, and will follow the other trail."

"Yes, that will do very well," the settler agreed.

Reuben at once called to the trackers, who were trotting on ahead, and then ordered a halt.

The two blacks came back.

"Joe," Reuben said, "Mr. Blount thinks that the main body of the flock have not come this way. He says he thinks only a hundred or two have come. The ground does not look to me anything like so much trampled as it was before we halted."

"I tink most of dem hab come along here," the tracker said sullenly.

"What do you think?" Reuben asked the other settlers who had gathered round.

"I did not notice it before," Dick Caister said; "but now Blount has pointed it out, I agree with him entirely. There are nothing like the full number of sheep have passed along here. I should say that they have not gone along more than two or three deep." There was a general chorus of assent.

"You can't have been keeping your eyes open," Reuben said to the trackers sharply. "Come, gentlemen, let us ride back to the halting-place and see if we cannot find out which way the main body have gone.

Ten minutes' riding took them back to their starting-place. "They must have gone over the hill," Reuben said. "They certainly have not kept along at the

foot, or we should see their tracks in this long grass."

The trackers had exchanged a few words in a low tone, and they now moved up the hill and began to examine the ground carefully.

"Some of dem have gone this way, captain."

"Of course they have," Mr. Blount said; "a blind man might see that." The marks of the sheep were indeed plain enough to all when their attention had once been drawn to the subject. On getting beyond the crest the trackers turned to the left, and Reuben saw that they felt it would be hopeless to attempt further to mislead a party containing several settlers who were perfectly capable of following the trail. Jim had, since speaking to his master, remained in the rear of the troop. After three miles' riding across the downs they again came down upon a flat country thickly covered with brush. Here and there pieces of wool sticking to thorns were visible, and the trackers went steadily on for some little time. Then their pace became slower and finally they stopped.

"Trail ended, captain."

"What do you mean by the trail ended?" Reuben asked angrily. "Why, I can see a piece of wool on there ahead."

"Dat so, captain; but only a few sheep hab passed here." Some of the settlers dismounted, and having examined the ground carefully, declared that they were of the same opinion as the trackers.

"Very well," Reuben said; "then in that case we must go back again to the foot of the hill. They were all together there, and we must take up the trail afresh."

On reaching the foot of the hill Jim and some of the settlers joined the trackers and penetrated the bush in all directions. Each returned bringing in pieces of wool.

"It is plain enough," Reuben said, "what they have done. They have broken up into small parties and have scattered. The question is, What are we to do now? What do you think, Mr. Blount?"

"I don't know what to recommend," the settler said. "They have no doubt done it to confuse us in case we should follow so far, and avoid being thrown off the scent the other side of the hill. The band may really have scattered and gone off in small parties to different parts of the bush, or again they may have scattered with the understanding that they will meet again at some given spot which may be ten and may be fifty miles ahead."

"In that case," Reuben said, "let us go on. We will break up into three parties. One shall go straight forward, the other two moving to the right and left, each following the tracks as well as they can. We will not go much beyond a walk. We have five more hours of daylight yet, and the horses can manage another fifteen miles. I will halt an hour before it gets dark and light a fire. The smoke will be a guide to the other two parties, who should not be more than a couple of miles to the right and left, and they will then close in. Of course I see the objection that the blacks may make out the smoke and will know that they are being followed."

"Yes, that is an objection," Mr. Blount said; "but the chances are that they will know it without your telling them. It is more than probable that some of them have remained behind on the watch, and that they will have signalled our coming long ago."

"Well, in that case, Mr. Blount, there can be no harm in my making a smoke, as they know already that they are pursued. Will you take charge of the right-hand party? Sergeant O'Connor will take command of the

left. Do you each take a tracker with you. I will take my boy. Three constables will go with each of your parties and four with me. Will you gentlemen please to divide up so as to make seven altogether in each party without the natives?"

For four hours the party continued their journey.

"It is six o'clock," Reuben said looking at his watch; "we will halt now and light that fire."

Two of the constables were told off to keep watch some fifty yards in front, and the others dismounted and gathered together materials for a fire. This was soon done, and the smoke mounted straight and clear, a signal to the other two parties to close in. Suddenly a cry was heard from one of the sentries. The men stooping round the fire leaped to their feet just in time to see one of the constables struck from his horse by a boomerang, while a dozen spears whizzed through the air at the other. He fell forward on his horse, which carried him up to the fire; as he fell from the saddle as it stopped, he was caught by two of the others. Three spears had pierced him.

"Stand to your arms; steady, for your lives," Reuben shouted. "Jim, throw the horses at once and fasten their legs. We must defend ourselves here," he continued, turning to the others, "until help comes."

Not a moment was lost. The little party threw themselves down in a circle, each taking shelter behind a bush, and Jim speedily got the eight horses down in the centre, for each party had with it three of the spare animals. The whole time from the first alarm until all was ready to receive the natives did not occupy two minutes. The horses of the sentries had galloped wildly on, both having been struck by spears, and Jim had no difficulty with the remainder, which were all standing in a group when the

alarm was given, the owners not yet having removed their saddles.

All was done without flurry or excitement, although the yells of the natives rose from the bush all round them. The bush was fortunately not very thick at the point where they had halted, Reuben having selected it for that very reason, but the bushes were sufficiently near to each other to enable an enemy to creep up within thirty yards or so without being seen.

"Don't throw away a shot," Reuben called out, "but pick off the blacks as they stand up to throw their spears. Ah!"

The exclamation was accompanied by a shot from his rifle as a native rose suddenly from the bush and hurled his spear. It missed Reuben by an inch or two only; but, as his rifle flashed out, the black threw up his hands and fell back in the bush.

"Here, sah, dis make good shelter;" and Jim propped up his saddle almost in front of him.

"That's a good idea, Jim; help the others in the same way."

The five men were all engaged now; the spears whizzed fast over and among them, but most of them were thrown almost at random, for the blacks soon learned that to raise themselves above the bushes to take aim was to court sudden death. Jim, after distributing the saddles to their owners, had lain down by the side of his master and loaded his rifle as fast as he discharged it, Reuben using his pistols as effectually as the rifle in the intervals.

For half an hour the fight continued. Many of the blacks had fallen, but they continued the assault as vigorously as before, and all the defenders had received more or less serious wounds from the spears.

"The others ought to have been here long before this,"

Reuben said. "I only hope they have not been attacked too; but as we don't hear any firing that can hardly be so."

"I hope they will be up before dusk," Dick Caister said; "it will be dark in another half an hour. These fellows are only waiting for that to make a rush."

Another ten minutes elapsed.

"Hurrah!" Reuben exclaimed, "I can hear the trampling of horses' hoofs. The moment they arrive make a rush for your horses and charge."

"I am afraid the horses are killed," Dick said ruefully.

"In that case," Reuben said, "we must get to our feet and pick off the blacks as they run; they will get up like a covey of partridge as the horsemen come among them."

A loud cheer was heard, and the little party, with an answering shout, sprang to their feet and, rifle to shoulder, stood expecting the blacks to rise; but the ears of the natives were sharper than those of the whites, and they had begun to crawl away before the latter heard the approaching horsemen. Finding this to be the case the party ran to their horses; four exclamations of wrath and grief were heard, for seven of the horses were completely riddled with spears.

Tartar, however, at his master's voice, struggled to rise to his feet. Reuben, aided by Jim, quickly threw off the hobbles and leaped on to its back as it rose to its feet, just as Mr. Blount with his party rode up.

"Keep close together," Reuben exclaimed as he dashed forward; "we may find some of the scoundrels."

But the chase was in vain. It was already growing dusk and there was no saying in which direction the natives had crawled away in the bush. After riding for a mile Reuben reined in his horse.

"It is no use," he said; "we may as well get back to

the fire. What made you so late, Mr. Blount? We were fighting for three-quarters of an hour before you came up."

"I am very sorry," Mr. Blount replied; "somehow or other we went wrong altogether. There is nothing to guide one in this flat bush, and the tracker who was leading the way said he was certain he was going as you ordered him. Just before six o'clock we halted and looked in the direction in which we expected to see your smoke, but there was no signs of it. Presently one of the constables exclaimed, 'There's the smoke, sir, right behind us.' I looked around, and, sure enough, there was a column of smoke, and a long way off it was. 'What have you been doing, you rascal?' I said to the black. 'There's the smoke right behind us; you have been leading us wrong altogether.' The black insisted that he was right, and that the fire must have been made by the black fellows. I didn't know what to make of it. It was two or three minutes past six, and I noticed when we halted before that your watch was exactly with mine, so I said to the men, 'We will wait five minutes longer, and, if we see no other smoke, you may be sure that that is made by Captain Whitney.'"

"We waited the five minutes and then I gave the word to start, when one of the men exclaimed, 'The black fellow's gone.' Sure enough, he had slipped away without being noticed while we were looking for the smoke. I felt sure now that something must be wrong, and we galloped towards your smoke as fast as the horses could lay their feet to the ground. When we were about halfway we heard the sound of firing, and I can tell you that we didn't lose a moment on the way after that. Have you had any losses?"

"Two of the constables are killed," Reuben said,

"and we have all got some more or less ugly scratches. My left arm is useless for a time, I am afraid. A spear went right through it. I fear some of the others have worse hurts."

"What can have become of the sergeant's party?" Mr. Blount said.

"They must have gone the wrong way too," Reuben replied. "I told you I suspected these trackers of being in league with the blacks, and I have no doubt your fellow led you purposely astray in order to give them an opportunity of cutting us off before you could arrive to our assistance. I suppose the other party has been misled in the same way."

Half an hour later the trampling of horses' hoofs was heard, and a few minutes later the sergeant and his party rode up.

"I am sorry I am so late, sir," the sergeant said. "Somehow or other we went wrong altogether, and saw nothing of your smoke. I was afraid something was wrong, but did not know what to do, so we halted till it came on dark, and presently made out a fire, but it was miles away and right in the direction from which we had come. I did not think it could be you; but, whether it was you or the blacks, that was the place to ride to."

"Have you got the tracker with you, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir; at least I saw him trotting ahead ten minutes ago. Why, where has he got to?"

The tracker was not to be seen.

"He has made off to join the blacks I expect," Reuben said. "You have been led astray purposely. We have been attacked, and Brown and Simpson are killed."

While the meat was cooking over the fire, Reuben told off a party of eight men to bury the bodies of the two constables who had fallen. The task was speedily

completed, two holes being easily scraped in the light sandy soil.

After supper was over the settlers gathered round Reuben.

"Now, captain, what do you mean to do?" Mr. Blount asked. "I have given up all hope of seeing my sheep again, so don't let them influence you, but just do as you think best. The blacks are in strong force, that is evident, and it will be a serious business pursuing them any further in their own country."

"I am going to pursue them till I catch them," Reuben said, "that is to say as long as there is a sheep track to serve as a guide. I don't ask you, gentlemen, to go further, for I know it is a serious risk; but it is my duty to hunt those fellows down and give them a lesson, and I mean to do it. We shall never have safety in the settlements until those fellows come to understand that when ever they attack us they will be hunted down."

"I think you are right," Dick Caister said, "and as long as you go on I go with you for one, whatever comes of it. But how I am to go without my horse, I don't know."

"There are the spare horses," Reuben said; "fortunately we have still got six of them."

"So we have," Dick exclaimed joyfully. "I had forgotten all about them. What luck our bringing them with us!"

The other settlers all announced their intention of continuing the chase as long as Reuben was willing to push on.

"I will tell you what my idea is," Reuben said. "The horses are already worn out, and by the end of another day they will be half-mad with thirst. I propose that we take two days' supply for ourselves in our water bottles, and that we push forward on foot, sending two of the

constables back to the stream with our horses. I propose that we should push forward to-night. I expect the track we are following is the true one, and the stars will do as a guide. At daybreak we will lie down in the bushes. The blacks will probably leave some fellows behind as scouts; they, seeing nothing of us, will suppose we have given it up and gone home, and they will make but a short journey. At night we will go on again, and the chances are that before morning we shall catch sight of their fires, and will fall upon them at daylight. What do you think of the plan?"

"I think it is a good one," Mr. Blount said warmly—"a capital plan. Of course we don't much like leaving our horses, for in this country one almost lives on horse-back; still, it will be the best plan certainly, for, as you say, the poor brutes will be half-mad by to-morrow night with thirst."

"It will be a long tramp back again," a settler said dismally.

"We won't tramp all the way," Reuben said with a smile. "Directly we have overtaken the blacks and given them a lesson, I will send Jim back again for the horses. He can cover the ground at a wonderful pace, and coming back he will ride one of them and help the two constables to keep them together. They will have had two days' rest and plenty of food and water, and will meet us before we get halfway back. There will be no fear of the blacks attacking them."

All agreed that the plan was excellent, and half an hour later the whole party, with the exception of the two constables who were to start at daybreak with the horses for the river, set out on their march. The sky was cloudless, and the stars would have been a sufficient guide even had they not had Jim with them. The black,

however took his place at the head of the party, and strode along as unhesitating as if it had been broad daylight.

CHAPTER IX

BUSHRANGERS

SCARCE a word was spoken as the little party marched along. It was possible, although very improbable, that the natives, on scattering before the charge of Mr. Blount and his companions, might have left some of their number behind to watch the movements of their pursuers. They would, however, certainly not anticipate the whites pushing forward that night. The fire had been piled high the last thing before leaving, and the two men left there were told to keep it burning brightly till morning, and to start before anyone watching in the distance would be able to see whether the horses were mounted or not. Should any natives approach the fire after they had gone, they would take it for granted that the whole party had ridden back to the settlement.

All night Reuben and his companions marched steadily forward, and were glad to throw themselves down on the ground at the first appearance of daybreak. Four sentries were placed with strict orders to keep a bright lookout through the bushes, but on no account to raise their heads above their level, and arrangements having been made for their relief every two hours the rest of the party were soon sound asleep. Except to relieve the sentries there was no stir among them until late in the afternoon; then there was a general movement, and soon all were

sitting up and appeasing their appetite upon the cold meat and dampers they had brought with them.

"There is no harm in a pipe, I suppose, captain?" Dick Caister said laughingly.

"No, I think we can risk that," Reuben replied. "The eyes of the savages may be wonderfully keen, but they would be a great deal sharper than I can give them credit for, were they to notice the smoke of a dozen pipes curling up among the bushes."

"I suppose, Mr. Blount," Reuben said, as, after the meal was finished, the party lighted their pipes and drew closely round the fire, "you have heard of a good many bad businesses with the blacks and bushrangers in your time?"

"I have, indeed," Mr. Blount replied. "In the early days the settlers had a hard time of it with the blacks, who were, of course, stronger than they are now, and, after they had got over their first fear of firearms, more fearless of the whites. The bushrangers, too, were, when first they began to send convicts here, more numerous than at present. I do not know that they were as desperate as they are now—not so ready to take life without provocation. You see there was a very much larger run of country open to them; and many convicts who escaped and took to the bush were content to have gained their freedom. Some of them took black gins and never troubled the colonists again, beyond, perhaps, coming down to a station and carrying off a sheep or two, or a bullock, when they got sick of kangaroo meat and wanted a change.

"You see the first settlers were generally poor and hard-working men. Young men with a little capital had not as yet been attracted here, so there was but little inducement for the escaped convicts to meddle with them.

There were, of course, some notorious scoundrels who seemed to murder for the pure love of the thing. The worst of them, I think, was a fellow who went by the name of Cockeye; what his real name was I never heard. That man was a perfect devil, and was for a long time the terror of the settlers. He never worked with other white men, but lived among the blacks. Of course in those days the police system was in its infancy, and we had to rely upon ourselves. I had a narrow escape once of losing my life from him and his blacks.

"When I was about seventeen I lived with my father and mother in a station about fifty miles from Sydney, or as it was called then Port Jackson. It was at that time quite an outlying station. We had two convicts allotted to us, both of them honest fellows enough, who had been transported for poaching or something of that kind—anyhow, they were not old hands and gave no trouble. My father was a kind master, and we always felt that in case of need we could rely upon them just as upon ourselves. In those days it was next to impossible to get hired hands, for as there was plenty of land for anyone to squat upon comparatively close to the port, the men who came out generally set up for themselves at once.

"One day I had been out on horseback to look for a couple of bullocks which had strayed away, and was on my way back when ahead of me I heard the cooey of the blacks. I didn't think much of it because they were common enough at that time, and a party had made a sort of encampment at a stream about a mile from the house; but when, a minute later, I heard a gun fired I guessed that there was mischief. The sound seemed to come from away towards the right, where I knew that one of our men was out herding the bullocks, so I clapped

spurs to my horse and rode in that direction. When I got near I saw the cattle running wildly about and a mob of black fellows among them. I could see no signs of our man, and guessed that he must have gone down, and that I had best ride and warn them at the house.

"The blacks saw me and started at a run in my direction, but I soon left them behind. I was within a quarter of a mile of the house when a native yell burst out ahead of me followed by two shots. I rode on, and when I got near the house saw a lot of black fellows round it. Then came a flash from one of the upper windows, and I saw one of them roll over. That was a satisfaction, for I knew they hadn't caught my father asleep. I knew the doors and shutters were strong, and that he could make a good fight of it. Still there was only him and my mother at home, for both the men had gone out before I left in the morning, and one man hasn't much chance of holding a house attacked on all sides. So I made up my mind to try to dash through them, when the shutter opened a little and my father shouted out: 'Ride for help, Bill; I will keep them off till you get back.' So I turned; but when I had gone a few yards I looked over my shoulder, and I saw a man dash out from behind the house on horseback and start at a gallop after me.

"It was a bay with a white leg, and I knew that Cockeye used to ride such a horse, and that there wasn't a better in the colony. Almost at the same moment I heard a shot again, but I didn't look round. I can tell you I felt pretty badly frightened, for there was no mercy to be expected from that scoundrel, and I knew that he was a good deal better mounted than I was.

"The next station was about four miles off, and I had about two hundred yards start, but before I had gone half a mile he was within fifty yards of me. I could hear

him cursing and swearing and shouting to me to stop, but I had made up my mind I would not do that. I had got a brace of pistols with me, but I wasn't much of a shot. I had, soon after I started, pulled them out of the holsters and shoved them into my belt in front of me, so that, as he came up, he shouldn't see my hand go down for them. My hope was that he would ride straight up to the side of me not knowing that I was armed, and that would give me a chance of suddenly letting fly at him.

"You would think the chance was a poor one, and that he would to a certainty shoot me down before he got up. I did not much think he would do that, for I guessed that the scoundrel would do with me as he had in some other cases, namely, take me and carry me back to the house, and there either threaten to shoot me, or hang me up over a fire, or some such devilry, to make those inside give in. I was determined this shouldn't be, and that if I could not shoot him I would be shot myself, for otherwise he would have got my father and mother, and it would have been three lives instead of one.

"Presently—crack!—came the sound of a pistol, and I heard the bullet whiz close by. I expect that it was only to frighten me into stopping; but in a second or two he fired again, and the shot just grazed my shoulder, so he was in earnest that time. I bent low on my saddle, got a pistol out of my belt and prepared. There was another shot, the horse gave a spring and I knew he was hit, but for a time he went faster than ever; still the last shot wasn't from more than twenty yards behind, and I expected every minute to see his horse's head coming up beside me. Then I heard a curse and a sudden fall, and looking round saw his horse was down.

"Cockeye was on his feet in a moment and drew

another pistol from his holster, so I concluded to keep on as hard as I could go without waiting to make enquiries. I guessed pretty well what had happened. The shot I had heard my father fire as he started after me had hit the horse, and the poor brute had kept on until he dropped. I understood the fellow's firing now; he felt his horse was failing under him, and his only chance was to stop me. I kept on till I got safe to the station. The three men there started in different directions to fetch assistance, and by the evening we had a score of men assembled there and started back to our station. We heard a cooeey when we were within a mile of the place, and guessed it was a fellow on the watch. By the time we got there, they had all cleared off, but it was a close thing. My mother was a courageous woman and had defended the back of the house and my father the front. The blacks had made several attempts to burn the place down; but the roof, like the walls, was made of solid timber, which is the only safe way to build a house when you are exposed to attacks of the blacks.

"As long as daylight lasted the old people had done very well and had kept the blacks at a distance, and we saw by the marks of blood in the morning that they must have killed or wounded eight or ten of them; but if we hadn't come up before the blacks had darkness to cover them it would have gone hard with them. Of course we knew that, and calculated so as to get there before night-fall."

"What became of the bushranger?" Reuben asked.

"Well, curiously enough, that was the last time he ever troubled the settlements. We never knew exactly what became of him, but it was said that the blacks killed and eat him; I know that was very often the end of those fellows. As long as all went on well the blacks were

friendly enough with them and were glad to follow their lead, but after a repulse like that they got at our station, or perhaps as a result of some quarrel about the division of the plunder, or their gins, or something of that sort, they would fall suddenly on their white friends and make cooked meat of them."

"I suppose the blacks seldom spare any whites who fall into their hands?" Reuben asked.

"Scarcely ever," Mr. Blount replied. "That was why they were more dreaded than the bushrangers. The latter would kill if they were in the humour for it; but if there was no serious resistance, and none of their number got hurt, more often than not they contented themselves by leaving everyone tied hand and foot till somebody came to unloose them. I remember one horrible case in which they so tied up three white men at a lonely station, and nobody happened to go near it for three weeks afterwards. It struck someone that none of them had been seen for some time, and a couple of men rode over, and to their horror found the three men dead of hunger and thirst. Now the black fellows don't do that sort of thing. When they do attack a station and take it they kill every soul, man, woman, and child."

"I suppose in that affair you were telling us of," Reuben asked, "both of your ticket-of-leave men were killed?"

"Yes; one seemed to have been surprised and speared at once, the other had made a stout fight for it, for the bodies of three natives were found near him. Of course such fellows as Cockeye and Fothergill are the exceptions and not the rule. Were there many of such scoundrels about we should have to abandon our settlements and make war upon them, for there would be no living in the colony till they were exterminated. Most of these fellows are the colonial version of the highwaymen at home.

They content themselves with taking what they can find in a traveller's pockets, or can obtain by a flying visit to his station."

"Yes, I had several of those in my last district," Reuben said. "They were just mounted robbers, and gave us a good deal of trouble in hunting them down. But none of them had shed blood during their career, and they did not even draw a pistol when we captured them. That style of bushranger is a nuisance, but no more. Men seldom carry much money about with them here, and no great harm was done."

"You see," Dick Caister said, "these fellows have a remarkable objection to putting their necks in the way of a noose, so that although they may lug out a pistol and shout 'Bail up!' they will very seldom draw a trigger if you show fight. So long as they do not take life they know that if they are caught, all they have to expect is to be kept at hard work during the rest of their sentence, and perhaps for a bit longer. They don't mind the risk of that. They have had their outing, sometimes a long one; but if they once take life they know it's hanging when they are caught, and are therefore careful not to press too hard upon their triggers. But once they have killed a man, they don't generally care how many more lives they take. As to being stuck up by an ordinary bushranger, one would think no more of it than of having one's pockets picked in England. It's lucky for us on the whole that the black fellows have such a hatred of the white men. Were it not for that a good many of these fellows would go all lengths, relying on taking to the bush when they had made the colony too hot to hold them. But there are only a few of them that have ever got on well with the blacks, and many a man who has gone out into the bush has found his end there. You see there's

no explaining to a dozen natives who jump up and begin to throw spears and boomerangs at you that you are a bad white fellow and not a colonist on the search for fresh runs. No, the bushrangers on the whole are not such a bad lot of fellows. I suppose there is not one of us here who hasn't had men ride up and ask for food who were, he knew pretty well, bushrangers. Of course they got their food, as anyone else would who rode up to a station and asked for it. Once only I was told to hand over any money I had in the house. As fortunately I had only a few pounds I gave it up without making a fight for it. It's no use risking one's life unless for something worth fighting for. I suppose most of us here have had similar experiences."

There was a general chorus of assent among the settlers.

"Many of them are poor-spirited wretches. Two of them bailed up a wagoner of mine coming out with a load from the port. He pretended to give in, and as they were opening some of the boxes he knocked one over with the butt end of his whip. The other fired a hasty shot and then jumped on to his horse and galloped off again, and my man brought in the fellow he had stunned."

"Did you hand him over to the police?" Keuben asked.

"Not I," the settler laughed. "I thought he had got what he deserved, so I bandaged up his head and let him go. Those poor beggars of convicts have a dreadful hard time of it, and I don't think there are many settlers who would hand over any man who had escaped and taken to the bush even if he had occasionally bailed up a wagoner or so. We know what a flogging the poor wretch would get, and as long as it's only an occasional robbery to keep themselves from starving we don't feel any great animosity against them. It's different altogether when they take to murder. Then, of course, they must be

hunted down like wild beasts. And now I vote that we have a nap. My pipe's out, and I suppose we shall be on the tramp again as soon as it is dark."

CHAPTER X

THE SIEGE

As soon as it became dark the journey was renewed.

"Now, Jim, you must keep your eyes well open," Reuben said. "There is no saying when we may come upon them now."

"I tink dey not berry far off, sah. Dose sheep too tired to go far. Black fellow glad to stop and rest when he see no one coming after him. De ground more up and down here. Must no make noise, may come upon dem sudden."

It was nearly midnight when Jim suddenly halted.

"What is it, Jim?" Reuben asked in a low voice.

Jim stood sniffing the air.

"Me smell fire, captain."

Reuben sniffed the air but shook his head.

"I don't smell anything, Jim."

"I smell him, sah, sure enough; not very close, perhaps, but in de air."

"What is it, Captain Whitney?" Mr. Blount asked, as he came forward and joined them.

"Jim says he smells fire, but I can't smell it."

"Oh, you can trust Jim's nose," the settler said. "It is wonderful how keen is the scent of these natives. They are like dogs in that respect, and can perceive the smell of a fire when the wind brings it down to them miles away."

"Dis way now, sah," Jim said, turning off to the left at right angles to the course which they had been pursuing. "Smell come down the wind, dat's sartin. We follow him far enough we sure catch dem."

For fully two miles Reuben followed the black without speaking, then he said:

"I don't smell any smoke, Jim. Are you quite sure you are right about it?"

"Quite sure, sah. De smoke much stronger than he was. Some of dese bushes make very sharp smell; can smell him very far away."

"That's all right, Jim, on we go then. I must take your word for it."

After another half an hour's walking Reuben thought that he too could smell an odour of burning wood, and soon afterwards he became convinced that it was so. The ground on which they were crossing was slightly undulated, and on nearing the crest of one of the slight rises Jim said:

"De smoke am getting strong now, sah, and Jim can hear de bleating of de sheep. If de captain will wait here, Jim will go on ahead and find out where dey lie."

"But perhaps you won't be able to find us again."

"Der no fear of dat, sah. But if I not come straight back I give a little whistle—like this—when I get on to a rise, and if the captain answer in just the same way, then I come straight back to him."

So saying Jim glided away in the darkness, while Reuben gave the word for the men to halt, and lie down till his return. There was, however, no occasion for a signal, for in little over half an hour from the time of Jim's leaving he rejoined them again, his coming being unnoticed until he stood among them, so noiseless were his footsteps.

"We hab dem dis time, sure enough, captain."

"Why, is that you, Jim? You quite startled me. Well, what is your news?"

"De black fellows and de sheep are a little over a mile away, sah. Dey got a big fire down in a bottom. Some of dem eating still, but most of dem fast asleep round de fire."

"How many are there of them?"

"About fifty, sah—at least dat about the number Jim saw. I expect I was right when I tell you dat there was wellnigh a hundred at fust, some ob them go off wid de sheep de odder way, and we kill over twenty in dat fight."

"Do you think we killed so many as that, Jim?"

"I went round, sah, and counted sixteen of dem, and some sure to have crawl away and die in de bush. Dere were over twenty killed altogether for sure, and I specks dat some more hab left de party to-day and gone off wid dere share of de sheep to der people."

"Well, what do you think, Mr. Blount—shall we attack them to-night or wait till morning?"

"I should say wait till morning, certainly," the settler said. "We might shoot a few if we attack them now, but the rest would be all off at the first flash of our gun, and we should never get another shot. I think our best plan would be to remain where we are for another couple of hours—it is two o'clock now—then Jim will guide us to the place, and we can take up our position as close as we can get and wait for daylight."

"There is no fear of their making a move before it is light, Jim?"

"No, sah. Dey tink dey am safe now and eat one big feast; dey not move till light, sartain."

"Very well, Mr. Blount, then we will do as you say. When we get near them we will divide into four parties.

You with four men shall move up close to the sheep, Sergeant O'Connor with four others shall work up from the other end of the bottom, five others shall make a detour and get right on the other side of their fire, and I with the other three and Jim, who you see has got one of the constables' rifles and ammunition, will come down on them from this side. Jim will place all the parties, taking them by turns, as near the fire as he thinks safe, and will then return to me. Only, as we shall attack them from four sides, let everyone be careful about his shooting, otherwise we shall have casualties from our own shots. All will remain quiet until I fire; then a general volley must be poured in with bullet and buckshot, and when the rifles and guns are empty go right at them with pistol and sword."

The plan was carried out as arranged, and before daybreak the four parties were lying in the positions allotted to them, within forty yards of the blacks. A few of these were seen sitting by the fire, the rest were all asleep. Gradually the light began to creep over the sky, and as it became lighter there was a movement among the blacks. As soon as he could see perfectly Reuben was about to fire in the air, for he did not like to fire at unsuspecting men, in spite of the deeds of blood and rapine they had performed in the settlement.

Presently, however, his eye fell upon one of the treacherous trackers who had so nearly brought destruction upon them; he levelled his rifle and fired, and the man fell dead in his tracks. As the rest of the blacks leapt to their feet a volley from nineteen guns was poured into them, followed by seven or eight more, as most of the settlers were armed with double-barrelled guns, a few buckshot being dropped into each barrel over the bullets. Then came the sharp cracks of the pistols as the whites rushed down to the assault.

The natives attempted no resistance. Panic-stricken at the sudden appearance of the foe, whom they imagined by this time far back on their way to the settlements, and paralysed by the slaughter made by the first volley, they thought only of flight. A few caught up their spears and waddies as they made a dash for the bushes, and strove to effect their escape between the parties advancing on each side of them; but the latter were now close at hand, and for a minute or two a fight took place between the whites with their clubbed muskets and the natives with their spears and waddies; but it was soon over, for the natives only fought to escape, and as soon as they saw an opening bounded away into the bushes. Only one of the assailants was killed, but several were more or less severely wounded by the spears, while no less than thirty-four of the blacks were killed. The victors made no attempt at pursuit, but as soon as the last of the natives had escaped they gathered to ascertain what loss had taken place on their side.

"Poor Phillips is killed," Mr. Blount said as he examined the body; "the spear has gone right through his throat. Fortunately he was a single man; he has only been out here a few months, and was staying down at Dick Caister's."

"Poor Tom," Dick said in feeling tones; "he was a capital young fellow, and I am deeply sorry. Fortunately he has left no one behind to grieve more than I do for him, for he lost his father and mother shortly before he came out, and was alone in the world."

"I am thankful it's no worse," Mr. Blount said. "We have given the blacks a terrible lesson. Of course we have not done with them, for they are very revengeful; but a blow like this will render them careful for a long time how they attack us. How many of them have fallen?"

"Thirty-four," Reuben said; "Jim has just been counting them up. Now, Mr. Blount, we will have another of your sheep for breakfast, and then we'll be off."

The sheep had scattered somewhat at the alarm of the fire, but were soon driven together again. One was caught and killed, and slices of the meat were stuck up on ramrods and were soon frizzling before the fire.

"Well, Mr. Blount, how many sheep do you think there are here?"

"I have just been looking them over," the settler replied, "and I should say there must be nearly twelve hundred, so that, allowing for two hundred driven off in the other direction, and a hundred dropped by the way, the whole flock are accounted for. I am indeed obliged to you and to my friends here. I never expected to see a tail of them again when I found they were off."

"I am very glad you have recovered so many of them," Reuben said, "and still more that we have given the blacks such a lesson. We will as soon as we have finished be on the march. Jim will go on ahead at once as we agreed, and he tells me will get to the stream where the horses are before night, and will start out with them at once so that we may be able to meet them to-morrow early. I fancy our water bottles are all getting very low, but we can hold on for to-day."

As soon as he had finished eating, Jim started off at a run, which Reuben knew he would keep up for hours. The body of young Phillips was buried, and then, collecting the flock and driving it before them, the rest started upon their return. The sheep could not travel fast, for many of them were footsore with their hurried journey, but they had found plenty of nourishment in the grass at the bottoms and in the foliage of the bushes, and being so supplied had suffered little from thirst.

Jim before starting had pointed out the exact line they were to follow, and this they kept by compass. With only one or two short halts they kept on until nightfall, and, leaving the sheep in a grassy bottom, lit their fire on the crest above in order that its flame might serve as a guide to Jim should he get back with the horses before daylight. There was but little talking before each stretched himself at length before the fire. They had been twenty-four hours without sleep, and all were now suffering severely from thirst; the last drops in the water-bottles had been emptied early in the day, and they were parched not only by the heat of the sun but by the stifling dust raised by the flock as they travelled.

There had been but little supper eaten; indeed most of them contented themselves with chewing pieces of raw meat to satisfy their thirst rather than their hunger. Although they had no fear of the return of the natives Reuben thought it only prudent to keep watch, and each of the party had half an hour on sentry duty. The day was just beginning to break when the man on guard exclaimed:

"I can hear the trampling of horses!"

The news brought everyone to their feet, and in a few minutes the two constables and Jim rode up, driving before them the horses of the rest of the party.

"Well done, Jim!" Reuben exclaimed. "Now, the first thing get one of the water-skins off."

One of the skins was unfastened in a minute, and after copious draughts everyone felt refreshed and ready for work again.

"We cannot start for a few hours," Reuben said. "The horses must have come over forty miles, and won't be fit to travel till the afternoon; fortunately there is plenty of grass for them in the bottom. And now that my thirst

is allayed I begin to discover that I am hungry."

There was a general chorus of assent, the fire was made up again, the men went down to the bottom and killed and brought up a sheep, and all were soon engaged in making up for their twenty-four hours' fast. In the afternoon a start was made; but although they travelled all night they did not reach the stream until the following afternoon, as they were obliged to accommodate their pace to that of the sheep. The following morning Reuben rode forward to the settlements, leaving Mr. Blount with two of his friends to come on with the flock at his leisure.

At the first farm he reached Reuben heard that, as he feared, the bushrangers had taken advantage of so many of the settlers being away to recommence their attacks. At the first two houses they visited they had found the inmates on the watch, and had moved off without making any attack. At the third they had surprised and killed a settler, his wife, and two hired men, and had sacked and burned the house. Reuben learned that some of the police had gone off in pursuit. Leaving his horse to the care of the settler, Reuben borrowed a fresh animal and rode off to the scene of the outrage, which was some thirty miles distant.

Just as he arrived there he met the party of eight police who had been in pursuit of the bushrangers, and they reported that they had lost all trace of them. For the next two or three weeks Reuben did not return to his headquarters, spending the time in riding from station to station with a small party of police and urging upon the settlers the necessity not only of strongly barricading their houses, but of keeping a watch by turns, as the bushrangers seldom attack a place unless they can gain the advantage of a surprise.

As nothing had been heard of the bushrangers, Reuben

determined to return to his barrack. He was spending the last night at Dick Caister's, when, just as they were about to turn in, the sound of a horse's hoofs at full gallop was heard.

"Something is the matter," Dick said; "men don't ride like that at night for nothing."

He went to the door and opened it just as the horseman stopped in front.

"Quick, Caister!" the man said as he leaped down, "the bushrangers are not fifty yards behind." And indeed the sound of the trampling of other horses sounded close behind.

"Come in, come in!" Dick cried.

"Ah! is it you, Shillito? Never mind the horse, he must look after himself. Luckily the captain's here, and we will give it them hot. Just run round and see that all the shutters are fastened."

As Dick spoke he was barring the door, and he now shouted at the top of his voice to the two hired men who were in bed upstairs; but before any answer could be returned there was a thundering knocking at the door.

"What is it?" Dick shouted.

"Open the door, and be quick about it, or it will be worse for you. We want that chap that's just ridden up, and we mean to have him, so he had best come out at once. If you don't open the door at once we will cut the throats of every soul in the house.

"You have got to get at our throats first, my fine fellow," Dick said jeeringly.

The knocking was at once renewed, but with greater violence.

"The door's a strong one," Dick said to Reuben, "and it will stand a good deal of that sort of thing, but we may as well move the table and benches up against it, then we can see how things stand."

Reuben had been busy taking down the guns which hung over the fireplace, dropping a ramrod into them to see that they were charged, and putting fresh caps on to the nipples. His own rifle stood in the corner, and was he knew ready for service.

"What arms have you altogether, Caister?"

"I have that rifle and double-barrel gun. Both my hands have got muskets; I got them up from Sydney a few months back."

The two men now came running down from above, each with his musket.

"Where is Jim?" Reuben said, looking round.

"He went out about ten minutes ago," Dick said. "I fancy he went to look after your horse; he takes as much care of that animal as if it were a child."

"I hope they won't find him in the stable and cut his throat," Reuben said; "he is wonderfully faithful and attached to me. I would not have harm come to him for for anything. Now, I will go upstairs and reconnoitre. Now those fellows have left off knocking at the door they are a good deal more dangerous than when they were kicking up all the row."

"Mind how you show yourself, captain, as likely enough one of them is on the watch expecting that we should be sure sooner or later to take a look out of that window; so keep well back. The night is pretty light, so I expect you will be able to make them out."

"Can we get a view of the stable from that window?"

"Yes," Dick replied, "I rather had that in my mind's eye when I put the stable up; it's always a good thing men knowing that their master can have an eye upon them when they least expect it. Why do you ask?"

"Because if the window commands the stable door we can prevent them getting the horses out."

"Yes," Dick said, "after losing two in the last affair it would be a serious matter to have the rest of them carried off."

Reuben went up the stairs and made his way towards the window, standing a short distance back. He could see no one moving about in the yard, and he was about to move close to it when a tremendous crash took place below, followed by loud shouts. He ran downstairs again.

The bushrangers had moved round to the back of the house, and there picking up a young tree which had been brought in to saw up into billets for firewood, they used it as a battering-ram against one of the shutters, and at the very first blow broke it off its hinges and then made a rush at the window. Two shots rang out almost together, and then firing a hasty volley into the window the bushrangers began to climb in; but by this time Reuben had arrived, and the sharp cracks of his pistols rang out.

"They have got the police here!" one of the men exclaimed as he caught a sight of Reuben's uniform.

"Draw off, lads, I expect it's that accursed captain," another voice exclaimed; "he's always riding about with nobody but that black fellow with him. He has got to go down, that fellow has, or he will give us no end of trouble; but draw off from that win low for a moment."

"What will they do next, I wonder?" Dick Caister said, as, leaving the two hands to guard the window, he returned into the other room with Reuben.

"I rather expect they are going to try to burn us out; we must keep them from that if we can. Mr. Shillito, will you go up to the upper room and keep an eye on the stables? Shoot down anyone who may pass your line of sight. Haven't you got any loopholes, Caister?"

"Yes, of course I have," Dick replied; "I had forgotten

all about them. Yes, there are two loopholes in the logs in each side of the house upstairs; they have been shut up by wisps of straw ever since the house was built."

Giving strict orders to the two men to shout instantly if anyone moved near the window, the two young men went upstairs.

"Have you seen anything, Shillito?"

"Not a thing; one would almost think that they have bolted."

"They will hardly do that, I fancy," Reuben said; "there are ten or twelve of them, but I think one or two must have got a bullet in them."

"I wish they would come on," Dick said as he pulled out the straw from the loopholes. Reuben went to them all in succession and looked out, but nothing could be seen of their assailants. Presently, however, a number of dark figures appeared, each bearing a burden.

"They have been cutting brushwood!" Reuben exclaimed. "I was right, you see; they are going to try to smoke or burn us out. Now I think it's time to give them a lesson."

"Look, look!"

The exclamation was excited by a sudden glare of light on the other side of the stables.

"The scoundrels have set fire to the stables!" Shillito said.

"What shall we do—make a sally?" Caister asked. "I am ready for it if you think right."

"No," Reuben said, "they would only shoot us down as we came out; they must guess that some of us are up at this window or they would try to carry the horses off instead of destroying them. I only wish we were on the poor beasts' backs, we would go for them though they were twice as many. I don't see the others now—they

must have gone round to the other side of the house."

Scarcely had Reuben taken up his station at one of the loopholes behind than he again saw the dark figures. He took steady aim and fired, there was a sharp cry, and one of the fellows fell to the ground; the others at once threw down their burdens and fled. Three minutes later there was a shout.

"Look here, you policeman, and you, Caister, you shall pay dearly for this night's work—I swear it, and Bill Fothergill never forgets his word in that way. It's your turn this time, it will be mine the next, and when it is, take care."

The only reply was a shot from Reuben, aimed in the direction from which the voice came. A minute later there was a trampling of horses.

"They are gone!" Shillito exclaimed.

"Perhaps it is only a trick to draw us out," Dick suggested.

"No, I don't think it's that," Reuben said; "they are not strong enough to send a party off and to attack us with the rest. No, I think they have gone; they know that we can't follow them, they have taken good care of that," he added bitterly as he glanced at the stables, which were now a sheet of flame; "however, we will look round and see."

The three men descended to the room below, and being joined by the two hands removed the furniture piled against the door and threw it open.

"We mustn't go round to that side of the house so as to get into the glare of the fire till we have looked round," Reuben said; "I believe they are all gone, but they may have left a couple of them lurking somewhere about to pick us off when we show in the light. I will take one of your hands, Caister, and scout round on one side, do you three go the other side."

A quarter of an hour later the two parties met near the stables, where the fire was now burning low. The roof had fallen in, and only some of the uprights were erect with flicking flames licking them as they stood glowing above the mass of still blazing débris.

"I wonder whether that poor fellow is under that?" Reuben said.

"I hope not, indeed. I fancy he must have got away; he might have slipped off when they first rode up; he may be hiding somewhere round, afraid to come near till he knows how matters have turned out."

So saying, he gave a loud cooey. They stood silent for a minute, but no answer came back.

"There is nothing to be done till morning," Dick said, "and it's no use hanging about here. Before it gets light I will start for Watson's; there are two of your men there, and they with the two Watsons and ourselves can set out after these fellows, if you are agreeable, that is, as soon as we get hold of some horses."

"I hardly think I shall be justified in taking you," Reuben said as he walked back towards the house; "these scoundrels are all armed to the teeth, and they are first-rate shots, they know every foot of the country, and against anything like equal numbers they would make a desperate fight of it, even if they did not thrash us. Of course in anything like an equal number of my own men I should not hesitate, but I don't think it will be fair for you settlers to undertake such a service as that."

"Listen!" Shillito exclaimed, "they are coming back again."

Surely enough on the night air the sound of horses galloping at full speed could be heard.

"I don't think it can be them," Reuben said; "they would have no motive in coming back after they once rode

off—they would know we should be ready for them.”

“I don’t see who else it can be. At any rate all our guns are loaded, and if it is them, all the better.”

Suddenly a loud cooey was heard.

“That’s Jim!” Reuben exclaimed; “I should know his call among a thousand. He must have made off to get help at once, but I don’t know how he can have done it in time.”

“Why, it’s the Watsons and my men!” he exclaimed as the party rode up into the light.

“All safe?” one of the settlers cried as he jumped from his horse.

“All safe, thank God,” Reuben replied. “Did Jim bring you news that we were attacked?”

“Yes; fortunately we were sitting up late talking when he rode up, so there was not a minute lost.”

“Rode up!” Reuben repeated in surprise; “why, where did you get a horse, Jim?”

“Rode master’s horse,” Jim said.

“What!” Reuben exclaimed in delight, “what, is Tartar safe? I was afraid his body was under those ruins. Why, how did you get him out?”

“Jim was in de stable, san, when bushranger ride up; de horses was stamping and I not hear dem till dey come quite close, den it was too late to run out. De moment dat dey began to make bobbery at door I opened stable door and bring out de three horses.”

“What! did you get mine out too?” Dick shouted. “Jim, you are a trump and no mistake.”

“Den,” Jim went on, paying no attention to the interruption, “me led de other two hosses little way and let them go loose, sure not go far from home, and I jump on Tartar and ride like de debil to Watson’s for de police.”

"Well done, Jim; you have done capitally. Now let us talk over what we had better do."

The party re-entered the house. Fresh wood was thrown on to the fire, and one of Dick's hands proceeded to put food on the table and prepare tea, while the others consulted what course should be pursued.

It was agreed at once that more aid would be necessary before they could think of attacking the bushrangers, but all were ready to join in the hunt for them. Therefore it was decided that Dick Shillito and the two Watsons should each ride at once to the neighbouring stations to bring aid. At one of the stations two more policemen would be found, and as in the pursuit they should probably pass near other stations, their numbers would swell as they went. When this was settled the party sat down to the meal.

"How did you come upon them, Shillito?" Casiter asked.

"I had been spending the day with the Wilkinsons. I did not start to ride home till it was rather late, and I was riding fast, when about a quarter of a mile before I got to my place I rode right into the middle of a lot of men on horseback. They evidently hadn't heard me coming, and were as much surprised as I was. There was a general shout of 'Bail up!' and I saw at once what sort of gentry they were. However, I didn't stop, but in the confusion dashed through. A few shots were fired at me. I suppose they were too surprised to aim straight. Then they started off after me. I knew it was no use making for home, for there was only one man there, so I swept round and made for your place. My horse is a good one, you know, and I gained on them all except one man, who must have been capitally mounted, for he gradually crept up to me. He wasn't twenty yards behind me when

he shouted, 'Stop, or I fire!' I pulled straight up, and as he came up to me let fly at him. He tumbled off his horse, and I galloped off till I got here."

"What has become of your horse, I wonder?"

"I gave him a cut with my whip as I jumped off. He cantered away. Of course they may have caught him, but I don't think it's likely."

"You will find him somewhere about at daylight, I expect. I will ride Caister's spare horse now." For Jim with one of the hands had gone out to fetch in the two horses from the spot where they had been turned loose.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

As soon as it was light the party assembled and started, Jim leading the way at a swinging pace which kept the horses going at a hard canter. The marks were for a time perfectly easy to follow. Five miles on the tracks led to a shepherd's hut. At their call the man came out.

"You had a visit from bushrangers last night?"

"What if I did?" the man replied gruffly. "I can't help where the bushrangers pay their visits. Yes, they came in here and said they wanted some supper, and you may guess I did not keep them waiting long, for they were not in a particularly good temper. From what they said three of their men had been killed."

This was already known to the party, as Jim had found three bodies at a short distance from the house. Two of these had evidently been carried there from the back window, where they had been killed in trying to effect

the entry, the other had been shot when approaching to fire the house.

"The captain of the gang was terrible put out, and was a-cussing and swearing as to what he would do to those as did it. I wouldn't be in their shoes if they were to fall into his hands."

"They didn't say anything which would give you an idea as to the direction they were taking?"

"Not they," the man replied. "You don't suppose they would be such fools as that, and if they were you don't suppose as I should be such a fool as to split on 'em. Not likely. I ain't no desire to wake up one night and find the door fastened outside and the thatch on fire."

"We may as well ride on," Reuben said; "we shall learn nothing here. The fellow is a ticket-of-leave man, and as likely as not in league with these scoundrels. I wonder what they came here for," he added as they started again.

"I tell you, sah," Jim said. "Dat fellow has driven his herd ober their trail—all stamped out—no saying where they hab gone to."

"We must follow the herd then," Reuben said. "If we look sharp we ought to be able to see the traces where they left them."

Jim shook his head.

"No find," he said decidedly. "Plenty places where de ground am berry hard and horse feet no show. Dey choose some place like dat and turn off, perhaps put rug under horses' feet so as to make no mark. Me sarch sah. Jim look him eyes very hard, but tink no find."

And so, to their great disappointment, it turned out. They followed the tracks of the herd three miles, until they came upon them quietly grazing; but nowhere could they see any trace of a party of horsemen turning

off. All the party were greatly vexed at the ill-success of their expedition, for all had hoped that they were at last going to overtake the gang who had done such mischief in the colony. Reuben was especially disgusted. He had only the day before received a letter from his chief acknowledging the receipt of his report describing the pursuit of the blacks, and congratulating him warmly upon his success. The letter ended:

"If you can but give as good an account of the bushrangers we shall be indeed grateful to you. As it is, you have more than justified my selection of you for the post."

Leaving two constables as guards at Dick Caister's station, in case, as was probable enough, the bushrangers should return to take revenge for the repulse they had experienced there, Reuben rode back to his headquarters, from which he had now been absent some time. The evening after his return he called Jim into his room.

"Jim," he said, "I want your advice as to the best way of finding out where these bushrangers are quartered. How do you think we had better set about it? Would it be of any use, do you think, for you to go among the natives and try and find out? There is no doubt they know, for they have often acted with the bushrangers. Do you think you could pass among them?"

"No, sah," Jim said at once. "Me no speak deir way. Me understand black fellow, me talk dar language, but not same way. They find out difference directly and kill me. De wild black fellows hate those who hab lived wid de white men. We hate dem just de same way. We say dem bad black fellow, dey say we no good."

"But those rascally trackers who led us wrong that day of the fight, they were friendly with them."

"Yes, sah, but dey not so very long away from the bush, and always keep friends wid the others. Meet

dem and talk to dem and tell dem dey set the white men on wrong tracks."

"Well, Jim, but could not you do the same?"

"No good, sah. Me brought up among de whites ever since me little boy. Dey not believe me if I go and say dat to dem. Jim ready to get killed if de captain want him, but no good at all him getting killed in dat way."

"I don't want you to get killed in any way, Jim, and if that's your opinion about it we will give up the plan at once. Can you think of any other way?"

"Me tink a lot about him. Me know de captain want very much to catch dose fellows, but Jim no see how dat can be done for sure. But de best plan me can see is for Jim to go out by himself and search de country outside white man's bounds. If he find de track of horses he follow dem up. Me know about de way dey ride off after dey be killing people at de stations. If Jim look, and look, and look berry sharp he find dar track for sure, and once he find dem he follow dem up. Must be water for sure where dey live. Dat good guide to begin with. But captain must not hurry; Jim may be long time before he find dem, dar no saying how long. Captain wish Jim to go?"

"Well, Jim, I don't want you to go, that is to say, I should miss you very much; but if you could find out the haunts of these scoundrels you would be doing me a very great service as well as the people of all the stations."

"Jim no care about oder people," the black said; "he care for de captain, and will go out and try and find tracks."

"Be careful, Jim, and don't get into trouble with them. If you were to fall into their hands, and they were to find out you were connected with the police, they would shoot you like a dog."

"Dey won't find out. White man not understand.

Black fellow all one to him. You hab no fear for Jim. Who look after hoss while Jim away?"

"I shall appoint one of the policemen as my orderly, Jim, and he will look after him."

Jim made a contemptuous gesture to signify that he had little confidence in the power of any white man to look after Tartar. For the rest of the evening Jim was occupied in cooking, and in the morning he was gone.

A week later Reuben was among the outlying stations again. He had heard nothing of the bushrangers, and no fresh attacks had been made by them since that upon Dick Caister's station. One evening just as he had gone up to bed he was roused by a sharp knocking at the door of the house in which he was stopping. The settlers had grown cautious now, and an upper window was opened, and Reuben heard the questions, "Who is there?" and "What is it?"

"Is Captain Witney here?"

"Yes, do you want him?"

"Yes, I want to see him directly."

In a minute Reuben had opened the door.

"I am Captain Witney," he said, "what is it?"

"I am glad I have found you, sir. They told me at the next station you were here yesterday, but they did not know whether you were here now. Well, sir, I am shepherding some twenty miles away, and this afternoon, just as I had got back to my hut, in runs a black fellow. It is a lonely spot, and I reached for my gun, thinking there was more of them, when he said: 'No shoot, me friend. Me sarve Captain Whitney of de police. You know him?' I said I had heard your name. 'You know where he is?' the black asked. I said I did not know for certain, but that when my mate went in for grub two days before he had heard say that you had been along there that

morning. The black said: 'Good. You run and find him.' 'Thank you,' says I. 'What for?' 'I find out about the bushrangers,' he said. 'You go and tell captain dat tomorrow morning before de day begins dey attack the station of Donald's.' 'Are you quite sure?' says I. 'Quite sure,' says the black. 'Me heard dem say so.' So as I hates the bushrangers like poison, I saddles up and rides into the station, and when I had told the boss he said I better ride and find you if I could. You would be at one of the stations this way. I stopped at three of them, and at the last they told me you were here."

"Thank you greatly, my good fellow. Donald's! I don't know the name. Where do they live?"

"They have only been here a couple of months," Reuben's host, who was standing beside him, replied. "They bought that station of Anderson's. He was a chicken-hearted young fellow, and sold out because of the bushrangers. There is a man, his wife, and her sister, I believe. I fancy they have got a pretty fair capital. They took Anderson's stock, and have been buying a lot more."

"That's why the bushrangers are going to attack them."

"I thought," Reuben said, "that Anderson's was not one of the most exposed stations."

"No, that was what everyone told him before he sold it."

"How far would you say it was from here?"

"Thirty-five miles," the settler said. "It's ten miles from Barker's, and I reckon that's twenty-five from here."

"Well, of course I shall ride at once. I have got my orderly, and there are two more men at the station this side of Barker's."

"I will go, of course," Reuben's host said, "and will

bring two men with me. You had best stop here for the night," he added, turning to the shepherd. "You have ridden pretty well thirty miles already, and that at the end of your day's work."

"Not I," the man replied. "Jim Walsh is not going to be lying in bed with the thought of two women in the hands of them murderous bushrangers. You might lend me a fresh horse if you have got one. If not, I must try and pick one up at one of the stations as we go along."

"I have plenty of horses in the yard," the settler said.

"Well, let us be off as soon as possible," Reuben put in. "It's past twelve o'clock now, and we have thirty-five miles to ride, and to stop at two or three places, so we haven't a minute to lose."

In a few minutes the horses were saddled, and the six men dashed off at full gallop. At three stations which they passed on the way to Barker's they picked up seven more. There was but little delay, as the instant the news was told the men hurried up, saddled their horses, and rode after the party, who pushed straight on when they had told their story. At Barker's they were joined by Barker himself and two men. Two constables had also been picked up on the way. The others overtook them here, and the party now numbered twenty men. There was a pause to allow all to come up, and to give the horses breathing time, for they had traversed twenty-five miles at a rapid pace with scarce a halt.

Mrs. Barker herself prepared a meal, to which, while the horses got their breath, their riders did justice; then they mounted again and rode for Donald's.

"It all depends," Reuben said, "as to our being there in time, whether the man keeps a careful watch. If he does they may not attack till the doors are opened, and then make a sudden rush and catch them unawares. If, when

they arrive there, they find the whole house is asleep, they may burst in at once."

"I think they will be careful," Mr Barker said. "I know Donald is very anxious, and no wonder, with two women with him, both young and pretty, quite out of the way indeed. In fact he told me the first day I rode over he had no idea of the unsettled state of the district, and wouldn't have taken the place if he had, not even if Anderson had given it as a gift, and he wrote down at once to some agent, and told him to sell the place again for whatever he can get for it; but I expect there will be some trouble in finding a purchaser. The district here has had a bad name for some time, and if Donald had not arrived fresh from England he must have heard of it. Listen! I thought I heard the sound of firing."

There was a momentary pause, but no one could hear anything. Nevertheless they went on at redoubled speed. They were now within three miles of the station. Suddenly on coming over a crest a faint light was seen ahead. It increased rapidly, and a tongue of flame leapt up.

"Come on, lads!" Reuben exclaimed; "the scoundrels are at their work."

At a hard gallop they crossed the intervening ground until they were within half a mile of the station, from which a broad sheet of flame was leaping up. Then Reuben drew rein, for he had outridden the rest of his party.

"Now," he said, when they were gathered; "let us keep in a close body. If they ride off as we arrive there, do you, Jones and Wilkins, stop at the station, and see if you can render any help; if not, follow us at once. Let the rest keep on with me straight after the bushrangers. There is already a faint light in the east. In half an hour it will be broad day, so even if they have got a start we shall be able to follow them. Now, come on."

At the head of his party Reuben rode at full speed down to the station. As he neared it he saw to his satisfaction that the flames arose from some of the outbuildings, and that the house itself was still intact; but as no firing had been heard he hoped that it still resisted.

There was a shrill whistle when the party approached within a hundred yards. Men were seen to dash out of the house and to leap upon their horses. With a shout Reuben rode down. He did not pause for a moment, but dashed past the house in the direction in which the bushrangers had fled. They were, he knew but a hundred yards ahead, but it was not light enough for him to see them, especially after riding through the glare of the fire. The sound of the horses' feet, however, afforded an indication; but as there was no saying in which direction they might turn, he was forced to halt every two or three minutes to listen. To his mortification he found that each time the sound was getting more indistinct, for the speed at which they had travelled had taken so much out of the horses that they were unable to compete with the fresher animals ridden by the bushrangers, who were all well mounted, many of the best horses in the district having been stolen by them. At last the sound could be heard no longer, and Reuben was reluctantly obliged to give the order to halt, for he feared he might override the trail.

"It is no use," he said, as he reined in his horse. "They will know as well as we do that they are out of hearing now, and might turn off anywhere. It is terribly annoying; we are too late to save the station, and the bushrangers have escaped. However, we will take up their trail as soon as it is daylight. Indeed I am expecting every moment to be joined by Jim, who is sure to be somewhere near, and can perhaps guide us direct to their hiding place."

Deeply disappointed the party dismounted from their horses.

"The scoundrels must have had someone on the watch," Reuben said, "or they would never have taken the alarm so soon. I am sorry now that we did not send a party round to the other side before we charged down upon them; but my blood was on fire at the sight of the burning station, and at the thought of the women in the hands of those scoundrels."

A minute later a man rode up at full speed from behind.

"Is that you, Jones?" Reuben said, stepping forward.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, reining in his horse. "I left Wilkins behind and rode on to tell you what had happened."

"What has happened, Jones?"

"It's a bad business, sir, a shocking bad business; but it might have been worse. It seems they broke in about half an hour before we got there; one of the hands was supposed to be on watch in the stockyard; but either he was asleep or they crept up to him and killed him before he could give the alarm. Then they got up to the house and burst in the door before the others were fairly awake. They shot the two hands at once; but I suppose, as their blood wasn't up, and no resistance was offered, they thought they had plenty of time for fooling, for they must have reckoned that no force they need be afraid of could be got together for three or four hours, so they made Donald and his wife and sister get breakfast for them. The women, it seemed, had got pistols, and both swore they would blow out their brains if any man laid a hand on them. However, the bushrangers did not touch them, though they told them they would have to go off with them. They made Donald sit down at one end of the table, while their captain took the other, and the two

women, half-dressed as they were, waited on them. It was lucky for them that we were so close when the alarm was given, for all made a rush to get to their horses, only the captain stopping a moment to let fly at Donald."

"Did he kill him?" Reuben asked.

"No, sir, the bullet hit him in the body, and the ladies were crying over him when I went in thinking he was dead. I thought so too, but I found he was breathing. They poured some brandy down his throat, and presently he opened his eyes; then as there was nothing for me to do I thought I had best gallop on and give you the news, for I knew that you would be anxious to know what had taken place."

"Thank you, Jones, you did quite right. What an escape those poor ladies have had! Another quarter of an hour we might have been too late, for those villains would not have kept up the farce long."

"No, sir, especially as they were drinking wine. The table was all covered with bottles."

"You did not see anything of Jim, did you?" Reuben enquired.

"No, sir, I did not see or hear anyone stirring about the place."

Reuben gave a loud cooey.

"That will bring him if he is anywhere within hearing."

But no answering call came back.

"I hope nothing has happened to the poor fellow," Reuben said after a pause.

"He could not possibly be here by this time," Mr. Barker said. "The place where he warned the shepherd must be sixty miles from here."

"Yes, quite that; but he can run nearly as fast as a horse can go, and he would be ten miles nearer here in a straight line than the way the man went round to fetch me."

As soon as it became light they followed the track, which was plainly visible; but when they had gone half a mile further there was a general cry of dismay—the ground was trampled in every direction.

"Confound it," Mr. Barker said. "they have done us! Do you see, they have ridden right into the middle of a large herd of cattle and have driven them off in every direction, and have, no doubt, themselves scattered among the cattle. They may go like that for three or four miles and then draw off from the cattle at any spot where the ground is hard and no tracks will be left, to meet again at some appointed place maybe fifty miles away."

"Then you don't think it's any use in pursuing them?" Reuben asked in a tone of deep disappointment.

"Not a bit in the world," Mr. Barker replied decisively. "If we had a native tracker with us he might possibly follow one horse's track among those of all the cattle, discover where he separates from them, and take up his trail, but I doubt even then if he would be successful. These fellows know that a strong party is in pursuit of them, and each of them will do everything they can to throw us off the scent. They are sure not to go straight to their place of meeting, but each will take circuitous routes and will make for thick bush, where it will be next to impossible for even a native to follow them. No, they have done us this time."

"Well, gentlemen, I hope you will all wait as long as you can at the station here. If my boy has not been shot by those scoundrels he is sure to find his way here, and will be able in all probability to set us on the right track. At any rate though the bushrangers have given us the slip we may congratulate ourselves on our morning's work. We have at least saved those poor ladies."

So saying Reuben turned and with the party rode

slowly back to the station. On arriving there they dismounted and unsaddled their horses and turned them into a paddock close to the house to feed. Reuben and Mr. Barker then went up to the house; the constable who had been left behind came out.

"Well, Wilkins, how is Mr. Donald, and how are the ladies?"

"He is sensible now, sir; but I don't think there's much chance for him."

"We ought to get a surgeon at once," Reuben said. "Who is the nearest, Mr. Barker?"

"The nearest is Ruskin."

"Is there no one nearer than that?" Reuben asked. "Why, he lives about halfway between where I was sleeping last night and my own place. It must be seventy miles away."

"He's the nearest," Mr. Barker said; "take my word for it."

"I'll tell you what will be the best plan," Reuben's host of the night before said. "I will ride at once to Mr. Barker's, and if he will let me get a fresh horse there I will gallop straight back to my place, and will send a man off the moment I arrive there to fetch Ruskin. It is only eight o'clock now; I can be home before noon, and my man will do the next stage in a little over four hours. If he finds Ruskin in he can get to my place by ten o'clock at night and can start again at daybreak, so by eleven o'clock to-morrow he can be here. If he isn't here by that time it will be because he was out when my man got there. At any rate he is sure to start directly he gets the message."

"That will be the best plan," Reuben agreed; "and I am sure the ladies will be greatly obliged to you when I tell them what you have undertaken."

"Oh, that's nothing," the settler said; "we don't think much of a seventy miles' ride here."

Without any further delay the settler saddled his horse and went off at a gallop towards Mr. Barker's, where he was to get a fresh mount.

"And now, how are the ladies, Wilkins?"

"They are keeping up bravely, sir. I think, as far as they are concerned, Donald's being hit has done them good. It has given them something to do, and they have not had time to think about what they have gone through and what a narrow escape they have had."

"Which room are they in, Wilkins?"

"In there to the left, sir."

"As you have seen them, Wilkins, you had better go in and tell them that we have sent off at once to fetch a surgeon, and that they may rely upon his being here some time to-morrow, we hope before noon. Ask if there is anything that we can do for them or for Mr. Donald."

The policemen went in, and Reuben called one of his other men.

"Perkins, do you, Jones, and Rider go in and fetch out the bodies of the men who have been killed; don't make more noise than you can help about it; carry them out to that shed there, and then get a bucket and wash down the floors wherever there are blood stains about. I want to have the place straight, so that those poor ladies may avoid seeing anything to recall the scene they have passed through. Of course you won't go into the room where they are now."

Three or four of the settlers at once volunteered to set to work to dig a grave.

"Choose a place a bit away from the house," one of them said—"the farther the better; it will remind them of this affair whenever they see it."

While Reuben was arranging this point the constable had come out and told Mr. Barker the ladies would be glad to see him.

"It's a terrible business," the settler said to Reuben as he turned to go into the house; "I feel downright afraid of facing them. To think how bright and pretty they looked when I rode over here ten days ago, and now there they are broken-hearted."

He returned in a few minutes.

"How is Donald?" was the general question.

"He is hard hit," the settler said, "just under the ribs on the right-hand side. I expect the fellow aimed at his head, but he was starting from his seat at the moment. He isn't in much pain. I have told them they must keep him perfectly quiet, and not let him move till the surgeon comes. They have asked me to see about everything. It's better we should not be going in and out of the house as he must be kept perfectly quiet, so I think we had better establish ourselves under that big tree over there. There are some sheep half a mile over that rise if two of you will go over, kill one and fetch it in. If you will light a fire under that tree I will hand out from the house flour, tea, sugar, and some cooking things."

There was a general murmur of approval, for all felt silent and awed at being so close to the house of death and sorrow. Two men got their horses and rode off to fetch the sheep, the others carried the various articles requisite up to the place fixed for the bivouac, while Wilkins was installed in the house to assist in anything that might be required there.

"The poor things told me to tell you, captain, how grateful they felt to you for the exertions you have made. I told them how it was we came to be here, and how you had ridden when you got the news to be here in time.

Mrs. Donald did not say much, poor thing, she seemed half-dazed; but her sister, who seems wonderfully cool and collected, quite realized what they had escaped, and there's many a young fellow who would give a good deal to win that look of gratitude she gave me when she said: 'I shall never forget what I owe you all.' I am just going to send off one of my men to fetch my wife over here; it will be a comfort to the two girls, for they are little more, to have a woman with them."

"There's nothing to be done for Donald, I suppose?" Reuben asked.

"Nothing; the wound is hardly bleeding at all. I told them that, as far as I knew, the best thing was to keep on it a flannel dipped in warm water and wrung out, and that they should give him a little broth or weak brandy and water whenever he seemed faint. My surgery does not go beyond that. If it had been a smashed finger, or a cut with an axe, or even a broken limb, I might have been some good, for I have seen plenty of accidents of all kinds since I came out twenty years ago, but a bullet wound in the body is beyond me altogether."

After the meal was cooked and eaten there was a consultation as to what had best be done next. Two or three of the settlers who were married men said that they would go home, as their wives would be anxious about them, the rest agreed to stop for at any rate another day.

Mr. Barker had found out from Mrs. Donald's sister the direction in which the cattle and sheep were grazing, and two or three of the party rode off to tell the shepherds and herdsmen, for there were three men on the farm in addition to those who had been killed, what had happened, and to tell them that they had better bring the cattle and sheep up to within a mile or so of the house, and come in themselves for their stores when required.

A grave was now dug and the three men buried. In the afternoon Mrs. Barker arrived and at once took charge of the affairs of the house. In the evening Mr. Barker came up to the fire round which the men were sitting.

"Will you come down to the house, Captain Whitney? the ladies have expressed a wish to see you. They want to thank you for what you have done."

"There is nothing to thank about," Reuben said. "I only did my duty as a police officer, and am disgusted at those scoundrels having got away. I have done all I could since I arrived, but I can't help feeling, being in command of the force here, that we are to some extent to blame for these fellows carrying on as they have done for months without being caught."

"I think you had better come down, Whitney," Mr. Barker said. "There is something bright and hopeful about you, and I think that a talk with you might cheer the poor things up a bit. When people are in the state they are they seem to turn to everyone for a gleam of hope and comfort."

"Oh, if you think I can do any good of course I will go, though I would rather stop here by a good way."

So saying Reuben went down with Mr. Barker to the house. A lady met them at the door.

"Arthur has just dozed off," she whispered. "Mrs. Barker is sitting by him; she insisted on our coming out. Will you come in here?"

As silently as possible the two men followed her into the kitchen and closed the door after them. The fire was blazing brightly, Wilkins having piled on some fresh logs before going out to smoke a pipe. Mrs. Donald was sitting in a dejected attitude by its right when her sister entered with Mr. Barker and Reuben. She rose, and coming towards Reuben said:

"How can we thank you, sir, for the exertions you have made, and for having saved us from I dare not think what fate? As long as we live my sister and I will bless you."

"I can assure you, Mrs. Donald," Reuben said, "that I have done nothing but my duty, and I only regret that we did not arrive half an hour earlier."

"Ah, if you had!" Mrs. Donald said. "But there—we must not repine—even in my sorrow I feel how much we have to be thankful for."

"Yes, indeed," her sister said, "we have truly reason to be grateful."

As she spoke Reuben looked at her more and more intently. He had started when she first spoke outside the house.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "is it possible, or am I dreaming? Surely you are Miss Kate Ellison?"

"Certainly I am," she said in surprise at his tone; "but I don't think—I don't remember—why, surely it is not Reuben Whitney?"

CHAPTER XII

AT DONALD'S

It is difficult to say whether Kate Ellison or Reuben Whitney was the most surprised at this unexpected meeting. The former, indeed, was aware that Reuben had come out to Australia; but that he should now stand before her as the officer to whose energy and activity she and her sister owed so much seemed almost incredible. But the surprise of Reuben was at least equal to that which she felt.

He could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses at seeing before him the young lady whom he had believed to be thousands of miles away in England. As is usual in these cases the girl was the first to recover from her surprise.

"And it is to you we owe so much!" she said, holding out her hand. "Mr. Barker spoke of our preserver as Captain Whitney, but somehow it never for a moment occurred to me to connect the name with you. Is it not extraordinary, Alice?" she said, turning to her sister.

"The surprise to me is even greater than to you, Miss Ellison," Reuben said. "Mr. Barker always spoke of Mrs. Donald and her sister, and I had not the least idea that you were in the colony. My mother wrote to me a year ago, telling me of the changes which have taken place; but although she said that you had left Tipping she said nothing about your coming out here."

Reuben had in fact been much disturbed in his mind a year previously by hearing from his mother that Mr. Ellison had died suddenly. He had, it seemed, lost a large sum of money from the failure of a bank in which he was a shareholder, and the blow had killed him. The estate was, when Mrs. Whitney wrote, for sale.

Reuben had written back, begging his mother to send him all particulars that she could gather, but communication between Australia and England was in those days very slow, and no answer had yet been received. Another letter had indeed told him that the estate had been sold. Mrs. Ellison, he knew, had died a few weeks after he had left England.

"It is very simple," Kate Ellison said quietly, "although, of course, it seems so strange to you our being here. My sister was engaged to Mr. Donald before papa's death, and as you know almost everything went owing to that

bank, and as I had no reason for staying in England I came out here with them."

Reuben subsequently learned that Mr. Ellison had disapproved of the engagement of his daughter with Mr. Donald, who was the younger son of a neighbouring squire. When after his death Mr. Ellison's affairs were wound up it was found that there remained only the six thousand pounds which his wife had brought him to be divided between her daughters. Mr. Donald possessed no capital, and had no prospects at home. He and Alice were quietly married three months after her father's death, and had sailed a week later for New South Wales, where, as land could be taken up at a nominal price, it was thought that her little fortune would be ample to start them comfortably. All this, however, Reuben did not learn until some time later.

After chatting for a short time he returned to the camp fire.

"This is very awkward, Mr. Barker," Mrs. Donald said; "do you know that Captain Whitney was at one time gardener's boy to our father?"

"Oh, Alice!" her sister exclaimed, "what difference can that make?"

"It seems to me," Mrs. Donald said, "that it makes a very great difference. You know mamma never thought well of him, and it is very awkward now finding him here in such a position, especially as he has laid us under an obligation to him. Do you not think so, Mr. Barker?"

"I do not pretend to know anything about such matters, Mrs. Donald," Mr. Barker said bluntly, "and I shouldn't have thought it could have made any difference to you what the man was who had saved you from such a fate as would have befallen you had it not been for his energy. I can only say that Captain Whitney is a

gentleman with whom anyone here or in the old country would be glad to associate. I may say that when he came here three or four months ago, my friend Mr. Hudson, one of the leading men in the colony, wrote to me, saying that Captain Whitney was one of his most intimate friends, that he was in every respect a good fellow, and that he himself was under a lifelong obligation to him, for he had, at the risk of his life when on the way out, saved that of his daughter when she was attacked by a mad Malay at the Cape. More than that I did not enquire. It was nothing to me whether he was born a prince or a peasant."

Mrs. Donald coloured hotly at the implied reproof of Mr. Barker's words. She had always shared her mother's prejudices against Reuben Whitney, and she had not been long enough in the colony to become accustomed to the changes of position which are there so frequent.

"You do not understand, Mr. Barker," she said pettishly; "it was not only that he was a boy employed in the family; there were other circumstances——"

"Oh, Alice!" Kate broke out, "how can you speak of such things? Here are we at present owing more than our lives to this man, and you are going now to damage him by raking up that miserable old story, Mr. Barker," she said impulsively, "my father, one of the most just as well as one of the most kind of men, had the highest opinion of Reuben Whitney; believe me there was nothing in the circumstances to which Alice alludes which could cast the slightest slur upon his character."

"I feel certain of that, my dear young lady," Mr. Barker said, "even without your assurance. Your sister is shaken by the events of the day, and no wonder, and I am quite sure that when she thinks this matter over she will see that, whatever her preconceived ideas may be,

it would be most ungrateful and ungenerous to breathe a single word in disparagement of Captain Whitney."

So saying he turned on his heel and left the room, and Kate, wishing to avoid further words on the matter with her sister, followed his example.

Mrs. Donald's reflections were not pleasant. She felt that Mr. Barker's reproof was well deserved, and that she had acted ungratefully and ungenerously. As a rule Mr. Ellison's elder daughter was by no means of an unkind disposition, but she was essentially her mother's child.

The question of Reuben Whitney had been one which had caused more serious dissension between her father and mother than any she ever remembered. She had taken her mother's view of the case, while Kate had agreed with her father; and although the subject had been dropped by mutual consent, it had been a very sore one, and at the sight of Reuben, the remembrance of the old unpleasantness had caused her to play a part which she could not but feel was mean and unworthy. She felt angry at herself—angry with Mr. Barker, with her sister, and with Reuben. She was standing there with her lips pressed together as she thought over the matter when Mrs. Barker came into the room.

"He is awake now, my dear; perhaps you had better go in to him."

Then she dismissed from her mind the events of the last few minutes, and went in to take her place by the side of her husband.

But as during the long hours of the night she sat there and thought over what had passed since the preceding evening, the thought of how much she owed Reuben Whitney was uppermost in her mind, and when in the morning Mrs. Barker relieved her, she went into the

other room, where Mr. Barker and Kate were about to sit down to breakfast, and said:

"Mr. Barker, I thank you for what you said to me last night. You were right and I was wrong. I was ungrateful and ungenerous. I can only say that it was a very sore subject, and that in my surprise I thought of the past and not the present. Believe me I am very sorry for what I said."

"That is quite enough, Mrs. Donald," Mr. Barker said heartily. "I am very glad you have said what you have. Let us say no more on the subject. You were shaken and not yourself, and I was wrong in taking you up so sharply under the circumstances."

Kate said nothing; but her face showed that she was greatly pleased at her sister's change of tone.

"What is going to be done, Mr. Barker?" Mrs. Donald asked. "Of course the friends who came to our rescue cannot stay here, and there is no chance of my husband being moved for a long time."

"I am afraid not, indeed," Mr. Barker said; "most of them will leave this afternoon in time to get back to their stations to-night. I have been speaking with Captain Whitney, and he says that he with his men will certainly stay here for the present. He sent off a messenger last night for six more of his men to join him here, for he still hopes to get news from his native boy, which may set him on the tracks of the bushrangers. You need, however, be under no alarm, for I think there is no chance whatever of the bushrangers returning. By the way, Whitney would like to speak to you after breakfast. He wants you to give him as minute a description as you can of the fellows you saw. We have already descriptions of four or five of them given by men whom they have stuck up; but the band must have increased lately, and any particulars might be useful."

Reuben came round in a quarter of an hour later. Mr. Barker fetched him into the room where Mrs. Barker and Kate were sitting.

"Mr. Donald is no worse, I am glad to hear," he said as he shook hands with the two ladies.

"I see no change whatever," Mrs. Barker said. "He is conscious, but does not speak much. He asked me this morning to tell you and all your friends how deeply he feels indebted to you."

"His thanks are due to the settlers rather than to me, Mrs. Barker. They were volunteers, you know, while I was simply on duty. We had, however, one common interest, to get here in time to save the station, and above all to catch and break up this gang of scoundrels; and now, Miss Ellison, if you feel equal to it, would you kindly give us an account of what happened? Mr. Barker said that he would not ask you yesterday; but something, perhaps, let drop by chance might serve as an indication to us as to the direction in which these fellows have gone."

"I will tell you certainly," the girl said, her face paling a little, "although it is dreadful even now to think of. We of course had no idea of attack, and had gone to bed as usual. One of the men was always on guard on the outside of the house, for these attacks made Mr. Donald nervous for the safety of my sister and myself. Simpson was on guard that night. Whether he went to sleep or not I cannot say."

"He did, Miss Ellison," Reuben interrupted. "We found his body round by the end of the house. He had evidently been sitting down on a log against the house, and had been killed by a crushing blow with some heavy instrument, probably one of the tools they used for breaking in."

"The first we knew about it," Kate went on, "was a

tremendous crash downstairs, which was followed by a continuous thundering noise. I think they must have burst the door in with crowbars or something; that was the first noise we heard; but a strong wooden bar inside kept the door in its place till they battered it down with a log. I hurried on some things. Just as I had done—it was not a minute, I think, from the time I woke—Alice ran in partly dressed too. I had heard Mr. Donald shout to the men, then there was another great crash as the bar gave way, and then some shots were fired.

“Mr. Donald had been standing just behind the door, and had fired through it the moment before it gave way. He had no time to step back, and was knocked down by the door. It was fortunate for him, for the bushrangers rushed in and shot down the two men instantly. Alice would have run down to see what had happened to her husband, but I would not let her out of my room; she could have done no good and might have been shot. Then we heard them moving about the house, swearing and using all sorts of horrible language, then they shouted up to us to come down or else they would come and fetch us, so we opened the door and came down at once. Alice gave a little cry of joy as she entered the room and saw her husband standing unhurt though still looking dazed and confused from his blow. The leader of the band—I suppose you have not seen him, Captain Whitney?”

“No, indeed,” Reuben said “I would give a good deal to catch sight of him.”

“What do you know about him?”

“I only know that he is a young fellow not much older than I am myself. His was a life sentence; he was concerned in a burglary in the country in which two old ladies were killed. Two of his accomplices were hung for

it, but in consideration of his youth, and as it was not proved that he took an absolute part in the murder, he got off with a life sentence. I heard about the case from Captain Wilson. He came out here about a year after I did. He had not been here a month when he killed one of the guard and made his escape. Since that time he has been a scourge to the colony. Not a week has passed without complaints of his bailing up and robbing teamsters on their way down to Sydney. He soon gathered two or three others about him, and his daring and impudence soon made him a noted character. Several times he with two other men rode into good-sized villages, and, pistol in hand, went from house to house and carried off every shilling in the place. He has ridden into large stores single-handed and compelled the storekeepers to hand over the contents of their tills. Sometimes they bring spare horses with them and ride off laden with groceries and stores. He has committed at least a score of murders, always using his pistol at the slightest show of opposition, and sometimes murdering apparently from pure love of the thing."

"Do you know his name?" Kate asked.

"His real name? No, I don't know that I ever heard it. He is always spoken of as Fothergill."

"I will tell you his real name presently," Kate said. "As my sister and I came into the kitchen he took off his hat and made a deep bow and said: 'Ladies, me and my mates are sorry to put you to any inconvenience, but as we happen to be hungry we must trouble you to get us some supper; you need not bother to make tea, wine is good enough for us.' Of course as we were in their hands there was nothing to do but to obey his orders; so we spread the cloth and brought out what there was in the larder. Then we fetched in the wine, and I brought

several bottles of spirits; for, as I whispered to Alice, 'If they get drunk we may be able to get away from them.' Before they sat down the captain told two of his men to go upstairs with us and fetch down our watches and jewelry and the money there was in the house. Mr. Donald had already told them where they would find that. We lit four candles and put them on the table.

"The captain ordered Mr. Donald to sit down facing him, saying with a sort of mock politeness that they should not really enjoy their food unless their host took the head of the table. Several times while they were eating I saw the captain looking hard at Alice and me. Presently he said: 'I have it now. Why, you are the Ellison girls, ain't you?'"

"I was astonished, as you may suppose, but I said: 'I am Miss Ellison, and Mrs. Donald is my sister.'

" 'By Jove, who would have thought it!' he said. 'Do you know who I am?'"

"I said I didn't, although really I seemed to have some sort of recollection of his face.

" 'Why,' he said, 'don't you remember Tom Thorne, whose father the squire turned out of the public-house? And to think now that the squire's daughters are waiting on me. This is a piece of luck. Well, my dears,' he went on with a horrible grin, 'you need not tell me how you came here now, you will have plenty of time for that. We have made up our minds to take you both with us, for it's a horrible lonely life in the bush without the pleasure of ladies' society. But I never dreamt that I was in for such a slice of luck as this.'

"Mr. Donald jumped from his seat as the fellow spoke, but in a moment he levelled a pistol at him and shouted, 'Sit down or I fire.' Alice rushed to her husband and pushed him down in his seat.

" 'I would rather die than go with you,' I said to him quietly.

" 'Perhaps so, my dear,' he replied; 'but you see you haven't got the choice.'

"Then he went on taunting us about old times, and especially reminding me that I had got him a thrashing over breaking the school-house window. When I went out to get some more wine, for they wouldn't touch the spirits, I got a knife and hid it in my dress, for I made up my mind to kill myself rather than that.

"A little later I stole upstairs and brought down a brace of pistols, which Mr. Donald kept under his pillow, and slipped one into Alice's hand. Presently they began to get noisy, and the captain ordered me to come and sit on his knee. Then Alice and I showed the pistols, and said we would shoot ourselves if one of them laid a finger on us. The captain muttered some order to his men which I didn't hear, but I guessed it was to leave us alone for the present. I had no doubt what they intended to do was to catch us off our guard and wrench the pistols from us, and I was glad I had the knife hidden away, for if they did carry us off I was sure to be able to find some opportunity for using that.

"It was awful!" the girl said, putting her hand to her face—"awful to be standing there and hearing them laughing and shouting and cursing. I was tempted to go behind him and shoot him suddenly, but the others would have been just as bad, and we should have gained nothing by it. I would not go through that half-hour again for all the money in the world. The men had just finished and were getting up from the table, and I knew the moment was coming fast, when we heard a sudden shout outside. My heart gave a bound as they rushed to the door. The captain fired a shot at Mr. Donald just as

he was getting up, and as he ran out shouted to me, 'I will come back for you, missy.' If it had not been for Mr. Donald falling to the ground I should have fainted; but Alice called me as she ran to him, and I think I was trying to lift him up when the constable ran in, and I knew we were saved."

Reuben had given a sudden start when Kate Ellison mentioned the name of Tom Thorne, but he had not interrupted her.

"I had a score against that scoundrel before," he said as she finished, "and by heavens I will settle accounts with him when I meet him. I could have forgiven him for the wrongs he did me; but now——" and his fingers closed on the hilt of the pistol in his belt.

Kate, who had been looking down as she told her story, raised her eyes at the tone of intense passion in the young officer's words, and a sudden flush of colour mounted into her cheeks, which were pale from the terror and excitement through which she had gone.

"I say ditto to Captain Whitney," Mr. Barker said. "I don't know anything about his previous doings against him, but I know that if ever I come across the scoundrel I will shoot him as a dog. Even you can't say anything against that, wife, though you are a'ways on the side of mercy."

"No," Mrs. Barker agreed. "I would say nothing to stay your hand there, John. Even putting this aside he has committed a score of murders, and there will be no more wrong in shooting him than there would be in killing a wild beast.

"That is the sound of a horse coming at a gallop, perhaps it is the doctor."

Hurrying to the door they found to their great satisfaction that Mrs. Barker's guess was verified. The surgeon

had been at home when the messenger arrived, and had started five minutes later, arriving three or four hours earlier than they had even ventured to hope. Mrs. Barker at once led the way into the next room, and a few minutes later came out again for hot water and sponges. Kate had stolen away upstairs when the surgeon had entered the house; the two men remained to hear the verdict.

"He is going to probe the wound; he can give no opinion yet till he discovers what course it has taken; but he says that it is a favourable symptom that the pulse is so strong and regular. He wishes you both to come in, as it will be necessary to hold his patient's hands while he is making the examination."

"I cannot give any positive opinion," the surgeon said when he had finished the examination. "I can't find the ball, and I cannot tell for certain what course it took after entering; but I think, judging from the pulse, and I may say from the expression of his face that no vital part is injured."

An exclamation of thankfulness broke from Mrs. Donald.

"We must not be too sanguine," Mr. Ruskin went on; "but there is certainly strong ground for hope. I shall be able to give a more definite opinion in the course of a few hours. He must, of course, be kept perfectly quiet, with no more nourishment than is absolutely necessary, and that in the shape of beef tea. I should make him a bed here; we will manage to slide a door under him and lift him on to it with as little movement as possible. At any rate madam," he said turning to Mrs. Donald, "I can congratulate you upon the fact that the bullet did not strike a couple of inches higher; had it done so my ride would have been a useless one."

A bed was at once brought from a room above and

made up, and Mr. Donald was placed upon it in the manner which Mr. Ruskin had suggested. Then with lightened hearts the party, with the exception of his wife, left the room.

Kate and Mrs. Barker at once set to to prepare a meal for the surgeon, while Reuben went over to give his companion the good news that the surgeon had strong hopes that Mr. Donald would recover. In the afternoon all the party, with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Barker and the constables, rode off to their respective stations, assuring Reuben of their readiness to assemble again at once should he obtain news which would afford a hope that the gang could be traced.

A few hours later the other four constables for whom Reuben had sent rode up. An outhouse was now prepared for the reception of the police, Reuben himself taking up his abode there, although Mrs. Donald strongly urged him to come into the house; but with Mr. and Mrs. Barker and the surgeon there, and the time of one of the ladies taken up with the wounded man, Reuben thought that their hands were perfectly full, and said that he should prefer to mess and sleep with his men.

"You see, Mrs. Donald," he said, as she tried to induce him to alter his determination, "I shall have to be sending out men and receiving reports, and may be obliged to ride out in the middle of the night; therefore, you see, as absolute quiet is ordered for your husband, it will be far better for me to be outside the house, as the coming and going would be sure to disturb him, and he would naturally want to know what is going on."

"You will not, I hope, take all your party away in pursuit of these men, Captain Whitney," she said anxiously. "They might get up some false alarm to take

you away and then come down upon the house again. I have been too much taken up with my husband to think much about it, but although Kate keeps up bravely I know that she is greatly shaken and terribly anxious. I don't know whether she told you, but it was to her chiefly that horrible man spoke, and it was she he told as he rushed out that he would come back to fetch her. She will never have a moment's peace or tranquillity till we hear that he is either killed or taken."

"Nor shall I," Reuben said. "I do not think that the scoundrel will dare to attempt to carry out his threat to come back again; but with so daring a villain it would be rash to omit the smallest precaution. You may be quite sure, Mrs. Donald, that in no case will I leave the house unprotected, and that if I should be called away I will leave two men here, who, during my absence, will remain in the house, and with them, Mr. Barker, and the doctor, you may feel perfectly assured that no open attack will be made. But I cannot impress too strongly upon you that, seeing the man with whom we have to deal, your sister should not stir outside the house until we have caught him, or until Mr. Donald is so far recovered as to be able to be removed. I will not tell her so myself, because I see that now the strain is over, she is greatly shaken, and I would not add to her anxiety; but if you could break it to her as if it were your own idea, that she had better keep within doors until this fellow's caught, I am sure that it will be well."

"You will come in this evening I hope, and always of an evening, Captain Whitney. It will make a change and cheer us up; besides, we want to hear all about your adventures since we saw you last."

This Reuben gladly promised, and after it was dark, and he had placed a sentry, he came into the house.

Mrs. Barker was on duty in the sickroom, and Reuben, at Mrs. Donald's request, gave them an account of the voyage out, and of the circumstances which had led to his entering the police. He would have passed very briefly over the affair at the Cape, but by many questions Mrs. Donald succeeded in eliciting from him all the details of the story.

"It was a gallant action indeed," she said warmly. "You certainly saved the lives of those two girls at a terrible risk of your own."

"To make the romance complete, Whitney," Mr. Barker remarked, "you ought to have married Miss Hudson."

"Unfortunately, you see," Reuben said with a smile, "In the first place I was only a boy, and she was two years my senior; in the next, and much more important place, she happened to be in love with someone else, and I did not happen to be in love with her, though she was, I admit, a very charming young lady, and had been extremely kind to me."

"How was that, Whitney?" Mr. Barker asked. "Eighteen is a susceptible age. I can only account for your coldness on the supposition that you had left your heart in England."

"I fancy my heart was then where it is now," Reuben rejoined with a slight smile.

"In the right place, eh, Whitney?"

"In the right place," Reuben repeated quietly.

At this moment Mrs. Barker entered and said that Mr. Donald would be glad if Reuben would come and sit with him for a little time.

"Don't let him talk much," Mr. Ruskin said, "the less he talks the better; but your talking to him for a time will cheer him up and do him good."

"I am glad to see you going on so well, Mr. Donald," Reuben said heartily as he entered. "The doctor says you are not to talk much; but you are to play the part of a listener."

"Do you think you will catch these fellows?" was Mr. Donald's first question.

"I will catch them sooner or later," Reuben said. "I will run them down if they are above ground; but I can take no steps in the matter until I hear from my black boy. I have been expecting him to turn up ever since I got here, and shall begin to be afraid that those scoundrels have ill-treated him if he does not turn up before long."

"My wife has been telling me that they knew you at home, Whitney, and that she and her people did you some terrible injustice somehow; but she wouldn't go into the matter. Curious, isn't it, your meeting at this end of the world, and that, too, at such a moment?"

"It is curious," Reuben said; "what people call a coincidence; but Mrs. Donald is mistaken in telling you that her people did me an injustice. Her father was one of the kindest friends I ever had, and although Mrs. Ellison somewhat misjudged me, and her daughter naturally shared her feeling, they were not in any way to be blamed for that, for they only thought as ninety-nine people out of a hundred did."

"Whitney, Whitney," Mr. Donald muttered to himself. "I seemed to know the name, though I cannot recall where. Ah!" he said suddenly, "of course I remember now, for I was in the court when——" and he stopped.

"When I was tried," Reuben put in quietly. "Yes, that was me; I was acquitted, as you know, principally from the way in which Mr. Ellison stood up for me. Thank God that he never for an instant believed that I was guilty."

"And to think it should be you!" Mr. Donald said; "how strange things turn out! I remember I could not make up my mind about it, it seemed so strange either way."

"We had better not talk about it now," Reuben said quietly. "I said then, and I say now, that I knew the people who did it; and, strange as the circumstances have already been, you may think them stranger still some day if I bring one of them before you alive or dead."

At this moment there was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Donald came in and said that one of the constabulary wished to speak to Reuben.

"Then I will say goodnight. I hope I shall find you getting on nicely in the morning, Mr. Donald. Will you say good night to Miss Ellison and Mrs. Barker for me, Mrs. Donald? and tell Mr. Barker that I shall be ready in five minutes to smoke that pipe we talked about with him outside."

CHAPTER XIII

JIM'S REPORT

"WELL, Jones, what is it?"

"Your black has just come, sir. I would not let him come in, for the fact is he ain't a figure to introduce among ladies."

"What's the matter with him, Jones?—not hurt, I hope."

"He has been knocked about a bit, sir, and he is done up with travelling. The poor fellow can hardly crawl, and was half-starved, so I set him to work eating, and came off to fetch you."

By this time they had arrived at the door of the shed. Jim was sitting by a fire eagerly devouring a hunch of cold meat. The men were standing round waiting till he had appeased his hunger before they asked any question. He looked up and nodded when Reuben entered.

"Well, Jim, I am glad to see you back," Reuben said heartily. "I was beginning to be afraid about you. I hope you are not hurt?"—for the black had a handkerchief tied round his head.

Jim gave a grunt, but continued stuffing great lumps of meat into his mouth. Reuben saw that he must wait till the black's hunger was satisfied, and stood quietly looking on until, having devoured some five pounds of meat, he gave a sigh of contentment, and then took a draught of rum and water which Constable Jones handed to him.

"Jim better now," he said.

"That's right, Jim; now tell us all about it."

Jim's story was a long one, and it took more than an hour in the telling, for his English was not always distinct, and it often required much questioning on Reuben's part before he could quite make out its meaning. The substance was as follows:—

On leaving some ten days before on the mission of discovering the haunt of the bushrangers, he knew that it was of no use to go among the wild blacks, their allies, as the hostility against their semi-civilized fellows was so great that he would at once have been killed. He resolved to go back to the spot where the track had been obliterated by that of the flock of sheep, to make a wide circuit and pick it up beyond, and if possible follow it until he found them. The difficulties were great, for the bushrangers had spared no pains in hiding their trail,

keeping always upon hard high ground, and at one time getting into the bed of a running stream and following it for two miles before they again struck for their rendezvous.

However, step by step, Jim had tracked them, sometimes losing the trail altogether, sometimes guided merely by a fresh-made scratch on the surface of a stone, or by a broken twig or bruised blade of grass. At last he traced it far out into the bush, many miles beyond the furthest range of settlements, and then he lost it altogether. There had been a halt for some time at this spot.

Beyond this Jim was entirely at fault. He made circle after circle round the spot, but could find no trace whatever of their passage, and returned to the point where he had missed the trail. He relit the embers of the fire which the bushrangers had made, cooked some food, and laid himself down first to think it over, then to sleep, for it was now just the close of day. It was clear to him that here more than anywhere else the bushrangers had made a great effort to throw anyone who might be pursuing them off the trail. He had no doubt that the bushrangers had muffled their horses' hoofs with cloth, and had proceeded with the greatest care through the bush so as to avoid breaking a single twig in their passage, and the only reason for such greater caution could be that it was here and here only that they wished to throw the pursuers off the trail. It would have seemed to a white man that they had done this before, especially when they had kept in the watercourse; but to black Jim's perception it appeared that they had been more careless than would be expected, and that while apparently doing their utmost to conceal their tracks they had really left sufficient indications to allow a practised tracker to follow them. Why then, now that they were far beyond

the settlements and fairly in the country of their native allies, should they for the first time so hide their trail that he could not discover it?

The result of Jim's thoughts was that when he awoke at daybreak he started back towards the settlements. When he came to the river which the party had passed in pursuit of the natives, he kept along its banks scrutinizing the ground with the greatest care.

After six miles' walking he suddenly stopped at a point where the soft turf near the margin was cut up by the passage of the party of horsemen. Here was the confirmation of his ideas.

Arguing the matter out with himself, Jim had arrived at the conclusion that hitherto the trail had been a false one, the bushrangers' object being to lead their pursuers to believe that they had gone far out into the native country, whereas in fact their hiding place was somewhere among the settlements. Should this be so, the only way to find them was to search for their back track. This he had now found, and, with a shout of triumph at his own cleverness, Jim forded the river and followed the track of the horses.

This was now clear enough, the horsemen taking no pains whatever to conceal their traces, feeling perfectly confident that any pursuers must now be thrown off the scent. Jim followed it till sundown, when he had made some thirty miles, and then, withdrawing some little distance from the tracks, he made his fire and camped for the night. He was now inside the line of the outlying stations, and had approached to the edge of a bit of wild and broken country which offered so few inducements to settlers that it had been passed by for the better land beyond, although occasionally, when herbage was scarce, the settlers in the neighbourhood drove the animals

up to feed among its hills. The black had no doubt that the gang of which he was in pursuit had their haunt somewhere in the heart of this wild and little-known tract.

In the morning he again started, and after travelling several miles, entered a narrow valley with very steep sides, with trees and brushwood growing wherever they could get a foothold. He now adopted a careless and indifferent carriage, and although he kept a sharp look-out, no one who saw him would have supposed that he had any particular object in view.

Presently he noticed that the tracks turned sharply off from the line he had followed in the centre of the valley, and entered the trees which grew thickly here at the foot of the hills. He made no halt even for an instant, but walked straight on. Half a mile further he sat down and lit his fire and began to cook some food. He had no doubt that he was watched, for just after he passed the point where the track turned off he heard a very low whistle among the trees. As he sat by the fire he kept his back towards the direction from which he had come, and when he presently heard footsteps no change in his attitude betrayed that he was conscious of the fact that persons were approaching him until two men stopped beside him. Then with a cry as of sudden alarm he leapt to his feet.

"Lor'-a-mussy!" he exclaimed, "de white man frighten me bery much. What for dey no say dey come?"

"Who are you, nigger, and where do you come from, and what are you doing here?"

"My name Jim," he said; "me going tro' the country looking for a place to 'tend hosses. Me bery good at hosses. Me look arter de hosses ob Mr. Hudson."

"What did you leave him for?" one of the men asked sternly.

"Someting lost from de house," Jim said quietly. "Massa Hudson tink me took it. He make bobbery, so Jim ran away and look for noder place."

"Um," the man said; "I wonder whether you are speaking the truth? If I thought you weren't I would put a bullet through your head in double quick time."

"No, sah," Jim said in great terror; "dat de truth sure 'nough. Jim try to get work at Sydney. Couldn't get; so start away and ask at all de stations. No one want black boy for hosses, so keep on and tink dere more chance out fuder. Does massa want a boy for hoss?"

"What do you think, Bill?" the man who had spoken asked his companion. "Shall we put a bullet in this fellow's head at once or make him useful?"

"I dussay he is a liar," the other replied; "but then all these black fellows are liars, so that does not make much difference. A black fellow would certainly be useful for the horses and to look after the fire. We can always shoot him when we have done with him. We shall soon see by the way he handles the horses whether he has been accustomed to them."

"All right," the other said. "You come along with us then."

"What wages massa pay?" Jim asked.

"Anything you may be worth. Don't you fret about wages." Jim pretended to hold out for a fixed sum, but the man said in stern tones, "Come along, we don't want no more jaw."

No other words passed till they got back to the trees, and then turned off where the horses had previously done so. Two minutes' walk brought them to a roughly made shed built against the almost perpendicular side of the hill. It was built of logs, and there was nothing

to show that it was inhabited. No smoke curled up from the chimney, the door and shutters were closed. Anyone who, passing through the valley, had turned among the trees and accidentally come upon it, would have taken it for some hut erected by a woodcutter.

One of the men knocked three times at the door, and it was at once opened. Jim was pushed inside, the men followed him, and the door was shut.

"Who have you got here?" a man sitting by the side of a large fire some distance inside the cottage asked angrily.

"It's a nigger who wants work. He says he is accustomed to horses, so, as it was the choice between shooting him and bringing him here, we thought we might as well bring him to you. It would be handy to have a fellow to look after the horses and cut the wood and make himself useful. If we find he is of no use there will be no great trouble in getting rid of him."

"That is true enough," the other said, "and I don't think there's much risk about it. Come here, you fellow, and let me look at you."

Jim stepped forward towards the fire. He saw now that the hut was built against the entrance to a cave of considerable size. In the centre was a great fire, the smoke of which probably made its way to the surface through crevices in the rock above. Four other men besides the one who had addressed him were lying on sheep-skins against the wall. There was an opening at the further end of the cave into an inner chamber, and here Jim knew, by an occasional snort or an impatient pawing, the horses were stabled. The chief of the party asked a few more questions as to where Jim had come from, and how he chanced to be passing through so unfrequented a country. As the black had already decided

upon his story, the questions were answered satisfactory enough.

"I think he's all right," the man said at last. "At any rate here he is, and he's not likely to go out again. We have been talking of getting a black fellow for some time, and as here is one ready to hand, we may as well make the best of him. Look you here," he went on sternly to the black; "you come of your own free will, and here you have got to stop. You will have as much to eat as you can stuff, plenty of rum to drink, and 'bacca to smoke, and if there's anything else you fancy, no doubt you can have it; only look you, if you put your foot outside that door, unless you are ordered to do so, I will put a bullet through your black brain."

"All right," Jim said. "Plenty eat, plenty drink, plenty smoke; dat suit Jim bery well. He no want to go out of de house if massa say no."

"That's settled then. Now, put some more logs on that fire."

Jim at once assumed his new duty, and the bush-rangers, who all hated the slightest work, were soon well satisfied with their new acquisition. There were several carcasses of sheep hanging from hooks placed in the roof, where they were slowly smoked by the fumes from the wood. A pile of logs were heaped up in one corner, and these had to be cut up into sizes and lengths suitable for the fire. At one end a space was roughly partitioned off, and this was filled with groceries, flour, and cases of wine and spirits which had been taken from wagons going up country.

In the stable were several sacks of oats and a barrel filled with water which was drawn from a spring a short distance from the hut. The first time Jim went into the stable the captain accompanied him, and soon saw by

the black's handling of the horses that his account was so far accurate, and that he was thoroughly accustomed to stable work.

The cooking was also handed over to him, and the gang passed their time in sleeping, drinking, playing cards, and discussing plans of robbery. For the first few days a sharp watch was kept up on the black, and the men went out themselves to chop wood or bring in water when it was required. After a few days, however, they relaxed their vigilance, and Jim gradually took these tasks also upon himself. He was perfectly aware, although he pretended to be unconscious of it, that the first few times he went out one or other of the bushrangers stole quietly after him and watched him at work, but as nothing suspicious was observed in his conduct this supervision was gradually given up.

"It's time to be moving again," the leader of the band said about a week after Jim had joined them. "We settled the next job should be Donald's station. We know for certain that he generally has money by him, and there will be the watches and trinkets of the women. That fellow Thompson, who worked for them at first, says he has got a first-rate cellar of wine, and that the women were both out-and-outers. If they are as pretty as he says we will have them here, lads, to do the housekeeping. We want something to liven us up; besides, we shall forget our company manners if we don't get some ladies to keep us up to the mark a little."

There was a burst of coarse laughter.

"What do you say, boys; shall we start to-morrow? It's a long ride, and we had best leave about noon. We must get into the neighbourhood before dark, so as to give the horses twelve hours' rest before we begin, for we may have to ride for it.

"It ain't likely. Barker's is the nearest station, and it would be hours before they could get together men enough who would dare to follow us; but still it's just as well to be prepared, and since that confounded new police officer has been on the station there's never been no certainty about things. We owe him one for that last affair, which cost Smith, Wilson, and Mulready their lives, but we will pay him out yet. Who would have thought of his being there just on that very night? I swear if I ever catch him I will roast him alive."

"He is no fool," one of the others said. "He gave it those black fellows hot and no mistake. The sooner he's put out of the way the better. He's a different sort of chap than the last fellow. I sha'n't feel comfortable till he's got either a spear or a pistol bullet in him."

Jim, who was squatting in the corner apparently half-asleep, was listening intently to every word. They did not heed his presence in the slightest, for, indeed, he had since his arrival so mixed his talk with native words that the bushrangers had no idea that he could follow their conversations. He was thinking now what was his best course to adopt. In the first place, he had gathered from their talk that this was only one of their hiding places, and that they seldom stayed very long in one neighbourhood. The question, therefore, was whether they would return. It was of no use his going to give the alarm unless he could return before his escape was suspected, or they would have made off before he could get back again. As for the Donalds, whose station was to be attacked, it gave him no concern whatever, for the Australian blacks had little or no regard for life, except those of people to whom they were attached. It was Reuben's mission to capture the bushrangers, and had it been necessary Jim would have remained quiet while a dozen families

were slain until he found an opportunity of bringing the police down upon them. He listened now intently for any word which might afford an index to their intentions. Presently the question he hoped for came.

"I suppose you will not come back here again, Tom?"

"No, I think it's getting too hot to hold us in these parts. We might ride back here, give our horses a rest, and load up with a few things we may want. We can bring two or three spare horses from Donald's. The weather is pleasant now, and we might very well put in a few weeks with the blacks. That last haul we made of traders' goods will put them in the best of humours. You may be sure there will be a hot chase after us, after this business, and I should propose that we try our luck down south for a bit."

"I agree with you," one of the others said. "We have had a very good spell here for the last ten months, and it don't do to tempt luck too long. That losing three of our number last week looked as if it was going to turn."

"What's it matter?" the captain laughed. "So much the more for us to divide. We have got a goodish bit of brass now, to say nothing of the goods we have got at each of our places. We can fill up their places easy enough any time, and those who come in are free to their share of what there is in the way of grub and goods, but they only share in the brass from the time they join."

Jim had heard what he wanted, and he now lay down and thought it out. They were only coming back for a short time; possibly they might change their minds and not return at all. It would be a risky thing to depend upon it; besides, his master might be blamed if this attack on the Donalds succeeded. It would be better, then, to try to get word to him in time for him to be there before the bushrangers arrived. He himself would

return to the hut, so that if the police arrived too late he would be able to continue with the bushrangers till some fresh opportunity occurred for bringing his master upon them. It was possible, of course, that one of the men would be left in the hut, in which case he had only to wait.

The next morning the men busied themselves examining and cleaning their arms, and after dinner they went to the inner cave and led out their horses.

"Now, look here," the leader said to him, "we are going away, you see."

Jim nodded.

"We come back again to-morrow. I lock this place up, you stop quiet till we come back. If anyone comes and knocks while we away, don't Jim answer. Let them think place empty."

"All right," Jim said shortly, and went and sat down by the fire as if he had no further interest in their proceedings. The windows, he had already noticed, had not only shutters outside, but they were firmly closed within with massive planks securely nailed and fastened. Jim heard the last of the party go out, and then the door was shut and the lock turned.

Jim heard the party ride off, and then threw himself on the ground and listened to assure himself that they kept steadily on their way. The moment he was sure they were gone he began to search the place for a tool which would fairly suit his purpose.

Presently he found a large butcher's knife with which they cut up the carcasses, and with this he set to work to dig a hole in the ground close to the wall of the hut. The bottom log was only sunk a few inches in the soil, and in two hours he had burrowed under it and made his way out beyond; then he crept back again, scraped

the earth into the hole again as tightly as he could, crawling out backwards; he then placed a piece of turf over the outside hole and stamped it down flat.

It was possible that after he had started they might change their mind and send one of their number back again; that, however, had to be risked, and at a steady run he set off for the settlements. He did not make for the nearest, for he had gathered from the talk of the men that the convict labourers of most of the settlements in the neighbourhood were in league with them.

After three hours' steady running, in which he had covered over twenty miles, he saw a shepherd's cottage, and making for it gave the man the message which he had taken to Reuben. He had no sooner done so, and had found that the man was willing to set off with it at once, than he turned and retraced his steps to the hut as rapidly as he had come. It was already dusk when he reached it.

Instead of approaching boldly he made a circuit and crawled up to it on his belly and lay for some time listening intently with his ear to the door. He felt convinced that no one was there; but to make sure he knocked and then withdrew among the trees. But all was still, and feeling sure now that the place was untenanted, he removed the piece of turf from the hole and made his way back into the hut again, carefully replacing the piece of turf, and then packing earth under it so that it would not give way if trodden upon. This, however, was a very unlikely occurrence, as he had made the opening where some bushes screened it from view.

He swept up every scrap of soil from the floor inside, filled up the hole there and trampled it down, and then, after indulging his appetite to the fullest, threw himself down and went to sleep. When he awoke a few streaks of light streaming through the cracks of the door showed

that it was day, and he made up the fire and awaited the return of the bushrangers.

It was four or five hours before they returned, and the instant they opened the door and entered Jim was sure that they had failed; but to his disappointment all were there, and his plan of taking them in a trap had not succeeded. At this he was not surprised, for his own calculations as to the distance to be traversed had shown him that it was very questionable whether, even under the most favourable circumstances, Reuben could have got there in time with his men.

Without speaking a word to him the men led their horses through to the inner cave and threw themselves down by the fire. Jim at once proceeded to unsaddle the horses and rub them down, keeping an ear open all the time to what was being said by the bushrangers. Their remarks, however, were for a time confined to terrible curses as to their luck.

"How did it come about, that's what I want to know?" the leader said; "this is the second time that accursed police fellow has turned up and put a spoke in our wheel. Why, it was not more than half an hour after the first shot was fired before they was down upon us; there must have been pretty nigh twenty of them. How could they have got such a lot of men as that together if they hadn't known we were coming? It beats me altogether."

"So it does me!" was the general exclamation.

"They seemed regularly to jump out of the ground just when all was going pleasant. Never knew such a bit of luck—that is, if it was luck, and not done o' purpose; and yet I don't see as they could have known possible as we was going there. Why, we didn't know ourselves till yesterday, not what day it was to be, and except ourselves and that black fellow no one could have known it."

"Well, it's certain none of us blabbed, and I don't see as how he could have told anyone."

"Not exactly," the leader said, "considering he's been shut up here ever since we have been away; besides I don't believe he knew anything about it. He don't make out half we say to him, and when we are talking together he minds us no more than if he had been a black monkey; but if he did it's no odds; he could not have passed through these walls and back again, and if he could, who was he to tell it to? The men round here are all our pals, and would have cut his jaw short with a bullet. But there, it's no use talking about it, he's not been out, and there's an end of it. Still, it beats me altogether; that police fellow seems to know what we are up to just as well as we do ourselves. I would give all my share of the swag we have made for the last six months for a shot at him."

"I don't like it," one of the others said, "I don't; blest if I do, and I says as the sooner we are out of here the better. After what's happened I sha'n't feel safe till I am well in of the blacks' country. If he knows what we are going to do, there ain't any reasons why he shouldn't know where we are."

"Why, Johnson," his leader sneered, "you don't really believe the fellow's a sort of conjurer, do you?"

"I don't know," the man said doggedly, "after he has turned up twice as he has, I shouldn't be surprised at nothing—not if I heard the sound of him and his men galloping up outside now."

There was a moment's silence as each involuntarily listened.

"We are getting to be like a pack of gals," the leader said savagely, "and I agree with you the sooner we are out of this the better. As soon as it gets dark we will be on the move; but I tell you directly we get out

among the blacks I shall come back again. I am going to carry off that gal somehow. I've owed her one for years and years, and I always pays my debts—at least, that sort of debt.”

“Now then, you black, just leave them horses for the present, and come and cook us some food; the quicker the better.”

Jim hurried about, but in the bushrangers' present state of temper nothing would satisfy them, and when, in his hurry to satisfy their angry orders, he stumbled and upset a glass of spirits and water he was handing to the captain, the latter caught up a brand from the fire and struck him so violent a blow on the temple with the glowing end that he fell senseless on the ground.

He must have lain there a long time. He was brought to his senses by a bucket of water being dashed over him, and he found when he staggered to his feet that the band were preparing to depart. They had already packed up the bales of presents for the blacks and placed them on the horses. Some of their more valuable belongings were packed away in a secret hiding place, the rest were left to take their chance till they returned, and, indeed, except by their friends among the shepherds, there was little probability of anyone paying a visit to the hut, however long their absence might be.

Had it not been that Jim had proved himself a really useful fellow for the last week they would have shot him at once and tossed his body in the wood; but they found it so pleasant having all their work taken off their hands that after a short discussion they decided to take him with them. The door was locked and they started at a trot, but evening was closing in, their horses had already performed two long journeys in the last twenty-four hours, and they soon settled into a walk. They

travelled for some hours, and it being then evident that the horses could proceed no further, a halt was called. No fire was lighted, for they were scarcely beyond the settlements, and for aught they could tell, an active search might still be carried on for them.

So anxious were they that they agreed to keep watch by turns, but when morning broke it was discovered that the black was missing. The next quarter of an hour was spent in angry recriminations; but as none could say in whose watch he made his escape their quarrel ceased.

"It's no use bothering about it," the leader said; "there's one thing, he knows nothing and can tell nothing against us; he may guess what he likes, but people don't waste time in listening to black fellows' stories. I expect he has only given us the slip because of that lick across the head I gave him last night. I admit I was a fool to do it, but I wasn't in the best of tempers; however, if the worst comes to the worst, he can only lead them to the hut, and they won't find much worth taking there. When we once get out to the blacks we can snap our fingers at them."

It was, indeed, about midnight when Jim had stolen away; he was still faint and giddy, and his face was terribly burned by the blow which had been dealt him; but when once fairly away from the bushrangers he set out in the direction in which he knew the Donalds' station lay, and never halted until he arrived there on the following evening, utterly wearied and worn out, for he had eaten nothing on the previous day.

"Then they have got away after all, Jim," Reuben said, when he had listened patiently to the long narration. "You have done all that was possible, Jim, you have done splendidly, my poor fellow, and although we were just too late to catch the bushrangers, we saved the

people here; but it is indeed unfortunate that they should have got off."

"Jim knows where dey hab gone," the black said; "dey have gone to de country of Bobitu—I heard dem say de name. Jim know dat country well—he come from der."

Further questions showed that Jim had indeed belonged to Bobitu's tribe, and had come with a party of his people down to the settlements, where he was taken ill and left to die, but was picked up and nursed by Mr. Hudson.

"And you could take us there?"

Jim nodded.

"Berry long march, massa; tree days with horses. Plenty bad people; much fight."

"I don't care how far it is, or how much fighting we have got to do, I am bound to hunt down that fellow, however far he's gone. I suppose there is no trouble about water—if they can go there, we can."

"Four, six waterholes," Jim said; "no trouble about dat, trouble from de black fellow."

"Well, we must risk it, anyhow. We can't start for a day or two. I must send and fetch up all the police and I dare say some of the colonists will join. The news of this business here has maddened everyone, and as it is not likely that the blacks will give any trouble for some time, and as we know the bushrangers have left for the present, no one need be afraid of leaving their station for a week or two."

The next day mounted messengers were sent off in all directions, giving notice that the police would start in three days' time for a hunt after the bushrangers, and that there was this time every prospect of success, as their hiding place was known.

On the day named no less than thirty settlers assembled,

together with the whole of the police force. All were well armed, and had brought several days' provisions with them. Mr. Donald had made marked progress, and the surgeon had now every hope of his recovery; but as he could not be moved, and it was just possible the bush ranger might return to carry out his threat during their absence, two constables were left in the house, and Kate was charged on no account to put her foot outside the door.

CHAPTER XIV

IN PURSUIT

THE last thing before the party started Reuben went into the house. Mr. Barker was going to remain behind; he was past middle life, and the expedition was likely to be a very toilsome one, and Reuben was glad when he said that he thought six days' severe riding would be rather too much for him, and that he should constitute himself the guardian of the ladies.

"My wife has arranged to stay here while you are away, so I shall ride over to my place and see that all is going on straight every day, and sleep here at night."

"Well, ladies," Reuben said as he entered the room, "we are just off. So I will say good-bye to you, and I hope that on my return I shall find Mr. Donald much better. I am sure that Mr. Ruskin would not have left this morning unless he felt that he had quite turned the corner. Pray take care of yourselves while we are away. You know I don't want to alarm you, but pray be careful.

I shall not feel comfortable as to your safety till I have that villain safely in my hands."

"Good-bye, Captain Whitney; you know you have all our best wishes," Mrs. Barker said. "We will take care of ourselves till we hear that you have destroyed the band, and above all its leader."

"The news that you have done so," Mrs. Donald said, "will do more, I think, for my husband than anything in the way of doctoring. But take care of yourself, Captain Whitney; I know from what Mr. Barker said that, although you make light of your expedition, it is a dangerous one. He said the police had never ventured so far in the bush, and you may expect sharp fighting with the blacks."

"We may have a brush with them," Reuben said lightly; "but do not be anxious about us; we are a very strong party, and you need have no fear of the result. Good-bye, Miss Ellison; pray be careful till I return." The last words were said in an undertone as he held her hand.

"Good-bye, Captain Whitney," she said; "God bless you all and bring you safely back."

Two minutes later the party rode off.

Jim was, like the rest, mounted, as they would travel fast. Four led horses carried provisions, for they would not, as before, find food by the way. It was two o'clock in the day when they started, and they rode thirty miles before they halted for the night at a waterhole. They had seen no signs of natives during the day, but Reuben at once posted four men as sentries.

It was a merry party round the fire, for all were in high spirits as the prospect of an expedition to a point far beyond that to which any white men, with the exception of fugitives from justice, had penetrated, and they

were delighted with the thought of putting a stop at last to the operations of the band who had so long been a scourge to the settlement. Mr. Blount, Dick Caister, and several others who had formed part of the last expedition were of the party, and the confidence which these felt in their young leader and in the sagacity of his native follower communicated itself to those who had not formed part of the previous expedition.

"Must start early," Jim said to Reuben the last thing. "Long way to water, ride all day, not get dere before dark."

They rode rapidly for some time after starting, so as to allow the horses to take it easily during the heat of the day, when there was a halt of three hours; but in the afternoon they quickened their pace again, and men and horses were jaded and done up when, just as the sun was setting, they arrived at their destination.

"How that black fellow of yours finds his way through this bush is a perfect marvel to me," Dick Caister said. "The country has become more undulating this afternoon, but the first thirty miles were almost perfectly level, and I could see nothing whatever that could serve as an index, except, of course, the sun. Still that is only a guide as to the general direction. It must have been nine or ten years since that fellow was here, and yet he led us as straight as if he was making for a church steeple."

"It seems to be a sort of instinct," Reuben said, "although possibly for the last part of the distance he may have seen signs of the passage of the natives. As far as I can understand, he tells me at this time of year there is no other waterhole within a long distance, so that naturally there will be many natives making for it. I am glad there are not any of them here now. Why isn't

that horse hobbled like the rest?" Reuben asked suddenly. "Whose is it?"

"That is the one your black fellow rode, sir," Sergeant O'Connor said.

"Jim, where are you?" Reuben called, but no reply came. "What has become of him, I wonder?" Reuben said. "Has anyone seen him since we rode up?"

"He jumped off the instant we came here," one of the policemen replied, "and said to me, 'Look after captain horse,' and I haven't seen anything of him since."

"There has been somebody here, sir," another policeman said, coming up. "Here's the remains of a fire behind this bush."

"Yes," Mr. Blount said, examining them and pulling out a brand that was still glowing. "Do you see, a lot of sand has been thrown over it. Whoever was here must have seen us coming, and tried to extinguish the fire when they caught sight of us."

"That is most unfortunate," Reuben said. "The fellows must have made off to carry the news of our coming to their friends. However, it's too late to do anything now; it's already getting dark, and they must have got a quarter of an hour's start. We have taken quite enough out of the horses, and can do no more with them if they have to travel to-morrow; but I would give a year's pay if this hadn't happened. Well, there's nothing to do for it but to light our fires and camp."

The knowledge that they had been seen, and that the news would be carried to those of whom they were in search, acted as a great damper on the spirits of the party, and the camp was much more quiet and subdued than it had been on the previous evening.

"All is not quite lost," Reuben said, when, two hours later, he found that Jim was still absent from the camp.

"I can only account for his stealing away from us in that manner by supposing that he must either have caught sight of the natives or come upon their trail, and at once set off in pursuit. I don't see what it could be otherwise."

"But if he saw them, why didn't he tell you, Whitney?" Mr. Blount said. "Tired as our horses were they could have got up a gallop for a bit."

"Yes, but for a very short distance," Dick Caister put in; "and as it was getting dusk, if the blacks had had anything like a start, we could not have overtaken them before it had got quite dark. Those blacks can run like the wind, it takes a well-mounted man to overtake them."

An hour after the party had lain down one of the sentries challenged, and the answer which came back, "All right, mc Jim," at once brought everyone to their feet.

"Well, Jim, what is it?—where have you been?" Reuben asked.

"Jim hungry."

"That you may be quite sure," Dick Caister said with a laugh. "Was there ever a native who wasn't hungry, unless he had stuffed himself half an hour before?"

"Yes, I kept some supper for you, Jim," Reuben said; "but before you begin to eat just tell me if everything is all right."

"Everything all right," Jim said, squatting himself beside the still glowing fire and beginning to eat.

Reuben knew by experience that it was of no use questioning him until he had finished, and he therefore waited patiently, although one or two of the settlers grumbled at being kept waiting for the news. When Jim had finished his meal he looked round. Reuben knew what he was expecting, and handed him a hornful of rum and water. The black took a draught, and then

without any further delay began to tell his story. He had, while still some distance from the halting place, seen a light smoke coming up, and was sure that a party was already there.

"But why did you not tell us, Jim?" Reuben interrupted. "We might have galloped on and caught them."

"No, sah, no catch dem; horses too tired, black fellow run away when see white men coming. Dat no do at all; only one way to do. Let 'em tink dat no one saw dem, else dey run and run all de way to Bobitu. When get near camp Jim see dat smoke not come up, know de black fellow see white man and put out um fire. When Jim come here he jump off hoss, find fire, and follow de track. Dey four men; one go one way, one go anoder, two men go straight on. Dey go on to tell Bobitu, de oders go to black fellows in de bush. Jim not care for dem, follow de two."

"But how could you follow them in the dark?"

"Jim was sure de way dey go, dat enough for Jim. He suppose dat dey 'top after a bit, and when dey see de white men all 'top quiet at de waterhole and light fire dey tink it all right. No make hurry, perhaps 'top and light a fire demselves. So Jim go on quiet for two tree hour, den at last he see fire sure 'nough. He crawl up quiet and see two black fellow dar, and hear what 'em say. Dey tired, make long walk to-day to waterhole; say no hurry, white men all go sleep round fire, not go on till sun get up, so dey stop for two tree hour to rest themselves. Jim get quite close and jump up, den cut off one black fellow head with sword, run sword through de body of other, finish 'em both and den come back to camp."

"Well done, indeed, Jim!" Reuben exclaimed, and a chorus of satisfaction rose from all the party at hearing that the men—who, had they reached the bushrangers,

would have given the alarm, and so enabled them to make their escape before the expedition arrived—had been killed. The news, however, that two of the party had escaped, and might bring the blacks down upon them before morning, necessitated an increase of precautions.

Reuben at once divided the force into four parties, each consisting of five constables and seven settlers. One party was at once placed on watch, and was to be relieved in two hours' time.

"I not tink dey come before morning, sah," Jim said. "No waterhole near here; to-morrow plenty black fellow come."

"All right, Jim, we don't care for them in the daylight, and now that I know the bushrangers won't be alarmed I don't mind."

Jim's prediction proved correct, the night passed off quietly, and the party again started at daylight. The country became more and more broken as they proceeded, the undulations became hills; some of these were so steep that all had to dismount and lead their horses up.

"Is Bobitu's camp among these hills, Jim?"

"Ober toder side, sah. Him place in valley toder side bush, plenty game for black fellow."

"How far is it to this valley, Jim?"

Jim's ideas of figures were but vague, and he could only say that they would get there somewhere about sunset.

"That would be a bad time to get there, Jim. We must halt a mile or two this side of them, and you must lead half the party round so as to cut off their retreat, even if we don't attack them till the morning. On their fresh horses those fellows will gallop right away from us if they once get a start. There is no fear, I hope of any of the other blacks getting there before us and giving the alarm?"

Jim shook his head.

"No; we come straight from waterhole, black fellow go round long way. No fear dey get dere; dey fight when we go back."

"That's all right. Bobitu's fellows and the bushrangers will be quite enough to tackle at once. As for the others we will make short work of them if they venture to attack us on the march back. They fight pluckily enough against men on foot, because they know they can make off when they like, but they can't stand a charge of horsemen."

Although not so long as the journey on the preceding day the men were heartily glad when, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, the halt was called, and they heard that the place where the bushrangers were supposed to be was but four miles away. After some consultation it was decided that Jim should lead half the band, consisting of ten constables under O'Connor and fifteen colonists, round through the hills to a position near the mouth of the valley, in which the blacks and bushrangers were likely to be, and that when he had posted them there he should come back again to their present halting place and lead forward the party under Reuben.

"Mind," Reuben said before the others started, "we don't want to attack the blacks unless they show fight; our object is the bushrangers. Jim says that by what he heard they have got some sort of houses they have built there; let us make straight for them; if the blacks attack, drive them off, but we can settle with them afterwards. The great point is to capture or kill the bushrangers."

All agreed to do this, for although the blacks gave great trouble by driving off the sheep and cattle, and sometimes killing the shepherds, there was not the same feeling of hatred entertained for them as for the bush-

rangers. It was felt to be natural that the natives should resent the occupation of their hunting grounds, and although they were shot down without mercy in fair fight, or if overtaken while carrying off cattle, there was no active feeling of animosity against them, and they were generally kindly treated when they called unarmed at the stations and asked for food.

Against the bushrangers, on the other hand, a deadly hatred was felt by the colonists, and the fact that these were constantly aided by the ticket-of-leave labourers increased the hostility with which they were regarded.

Jim left his horse behind him when he started with his party, saying that coming back at night in the dark he would rather be without it. After their comrades had set out, those who remained behind posted two men as sentries, and then, as soon as they had cooked and eaten a meal, laid themselves down to sleep until the time should come for their advance.

It was just midnight when Jim returned. He reported that he had seen no blacks by the way, and that he believed he had posted his party without their being observed. He himself, instead of returning by the same route that he had taken them, had come straight up the valley.

There were, he said, two huts which had been built by the bushrangers, and these were now occupied by them. There were great fires blazing, and he thought that the natives had probably only arrived there that evening. He had got near enough to find that they were in a high state of delight at the presents which their white friends had brought them.

"Did you catch sight of any of the bushrangers, Jim?" Reuben asked.

"Two of dem came out and spoke to black fellows at fire but too far off to see which dey were."

An hour before daybreak the party moved forward and halted within half a mile of the bushrangers' camp. There they stopped till they could see the sunlight touch the top of the hill at the right-hand side of the valley. This was the signal agreed upon, and, mounting, they rode forward at full speed. Just as they got within sight of the huts they heard a wild shouting, followed instantly by the crack of rifles. Another minute and they had reached the scene and joined the other party, who had made straight to the huts. The blacks, awakened suddenly as they were sleeping round the embers of their fires, had hastily thrown a volley of spears, and had darted away among the bushes.

"Surrender in the Queen's name!" Reuben shouted "and I promise you that you shall be taken down and have a fair trial." The answer came in the flash of a rifle from the window of one of the huts, and a constable immediately behind Reuben fell dead with the ball through his head.

"Dismount!" Reuben shouted, "and break in the doors." With a shout the men threw themselves from their horses and rushed at the doors of the huts. "Sergeant O'Connor," Reuben said; "do you with six of your men keep up a fire at the windows. Don't let a man show himself there. Let ten of the others look after the horses. We shall have the blacks back in no time."

So saying he ran forward and joined those who were battering at the doors. Several of them had brought stout axes with them, and the doors speedily gave way. There was a rush forward.

Mr. Blount fell dead, and Dick Caister's shoulder was broken by a bullet; but there was no check as the colonists

poured into the huts. There was a short sharp fight, but in two minutes it was over. Three of the gang had been shot as they leapt from the windows. Four more lay dead or dying in the huts. One of them had thrown down his arms and shouted for mercy. He had been knocked down and stunned by the butt end of a rifle, but was otherwise unwounded. Short as was the fight it had given time to the blacks to rally. Their shouts were ringing in the air, and the spears were flying thickly as the party, having finished their work, rushed outside again to assist the constables who were guarding the horses.

"Pour a volley into the bushes," Reuben shouted; "then mount and charge them."

The order was executed, and in a minute the horsemen were dashing hither and thither among the bushes shooting down with their pistols the blacks who resisted, or dealing tremendous blows among them with their hunting whips. The charge was irresistible, and in five minutes the main body of the blacks were flying at full speed up the steep hillsides. The victors soon gathered round the huts. Several men and horses had been wounded with spears, but none of the injuries were of a serious character.

"Well, how about the prisoners?" Reuben asked the sergeant, who had arrived before him.

"There's only one prisoner, sir; all the rest are accounted for."

"Is it their captain?"

"I don't know, sir, I have never set eyes on him; but if he's a young chap, as they say, it ain't him."

"Jim," Reuben said, "just go round and examine the bodies, and see which of them is captain."

Jim returned in a couple of minutes.

"None of dem ain't him, sah; he not dere."

Reuben started.

"Are you quite sure, Jim?"

"Quite sure, sah."

"Are you sure none of them escaped, sergeant?"

"I am quite sure of that, sir; no one came out of either of the doors, and there were only three who tried to bolt through the windows, and we accounted for them all. Perhaps that chap who is prisoner can tell you where to find the captain. It's a bad job indeed if he has escaped."

"Is the man recovering his senses?"

"Yes, sir, he's just coming round."

Reuben stepped into the hut. The escape of Thorne destroyed all the satisfaction which his success would have given him. He had good reason to know the fiendish malignity of the man, and in spite of the warnings he had given Kate Ellison, and his strict orders to the police on guard, he felt a thrill of anxiety now that he was aware her enemy was still at large. The prisoner was sitting up in a corner of the hut, a policeman with drawn sword standing near him.

"Where is your leader?" Reuben asked sternly—"the man you call Fothergill."

"He went away yesterday morning," the man said with a grin of satisfaction. "You haven't caught him yet, and you will hear more of him before you do."

"Where was he going?" Reuben demanded.

"You won't get nothing out of me," the fellow said. "He's been a good mate and a true, and I ain't going to put you bloodhounds on his scent. He's gone a-wooing, that's where he's gone, and that won't help you much."

Reuben at once went outside and called the settlers round him.

"I am sorry to say," he said, "that the leader of the party has got away. He rode off yesterday morning, and although the prisoner we have taken did not say where

he has gone, I have not the least doubt he has ridden back to the Donald's to try and carry out his threat to return for Miss Ellison. Therefore, gentlemen, may I ask you to start homeward at once. The horses have only done a few miles, and if we press forward we may manage to get to our camp of the evening before last. We have no more to do here, except to see if there are any valuables hidden in the huts, and set fire to them. I expect that we shall have fighting with the blacks on our way back. Those parties the two fellows who got away went to fetch will likely enough bar our way. If it were not for that I should ride on by myself, but my duty is to stop with my men until at any rate we have passed the place where the blacks are likely to attack us. That done, I shall push on. It is annoying indeed to think that that fellow must have passed us somewhere on the way yesterday."

The settlers agreed at once. They all sympathized with Reuben in his disappointment at the escape of the leader of the bushrangers, and regretted the matter deeply on their own account. They were, too, now that the work was done, anxious to be off, not only because they wished to return to their stations, but because they felt that their position was a dangerous one. They had penetrated to a distance hitherto unattempted into the country of the natives, and they knew that these would gather round them like hornets on their return march. Ten minutes were spent in the search of the huts. The police probed the ground with their swords and closely examined the walls. They found under some sheepskins in one corner a bag containing upwards of two hundred pounds, which was doubtless the amount which the bushrangers had brought back with them from their last plundering expedition, and had not yet been added to their main store, wherever that might be. This, however, was a

welcome find to the police, and they abandoned the idea of searching further, and were about to set fire to the hut when the prisoner said:

"Lookee here! I may as well tell you where the lot is hidden. It may do me good when it comes to the trial, and you may as well have it as for it to lay there. You dig up the ground in front of that tree behind the hut and you will find it."

Five minutes later a large leather bag containing a considerable quantity of gold and notes, and a number of watches, chains, and other trinkets was brought to light.

"Don't stop to count the money now," Reuben said; "fasten it on one of the horses, and let us be off. Sergeant, let Jones ride beside the prisoner, and be responsible for his safety. See that his hands are tied behind him, and his ankles tied securely to stirrup leathers. Let four men take charge of the eight horses of these bushrangers. Do you ride ahead with four others, and keep a sharp lookout as you go. Don't press the horses, but we must go at a smart pace, for we have a long day's march before us. It is fully sixty miles to the waterhole where we camped the night before last."

A few minutes later the party were in motion. Although disappointed at the escape of the leader of the band, they were well satisfied with the result of the expedition, and and at the small amount of loss at which it had been accomplished. There was general regret at the death of Mr. Blount; but two lives were considered to be but a small loss for the capture of so strong a body of bushrangers, who, knowing that they fought with ropes round their neck, always made a desperate resistance.

Half the journey was accomplished without incident, and Reuben felt satisfied that they would at least have

no trouble with the tribe they had scattered in the morning. The speedy start that they had made had taken them beyond their pursuit; and if attacked, it would be by other tribes. After an hour's halt to feed the horses and cook some meat for themselves the party proceeded again.

Another fifteen miles were passed, then Reuben saw the Sergeant with the little party ahead suddenly draw rein. He galloped forward to them.

"What is it, sergeant?"

"I am pretty sure I saw a black fellow's head over that rock, sir. It's a nasty piece of ground. I noticed it yesterday as I came along; it would be the worst place to be attacked in of any we have passed. If the blacks are here in force they know what they are doing."

Reuben examined the position. It was certainly a nasty place to be attacked in. The valley was narrow and thickly strewn with boulders of all sizes which had rolled down from the hillsides. Among these the bush grew thickly, and it was only down a narrow path in the centre, formed by a winter stream, now dry, that horsemen could pass.

"I don't think it would do to make a bolt through that, sir," the sergeant said, shaking his head. "We could only ride two abreast, and if they are strong we should be riddled with spears before we got through, and there's no charging them among these stones and bush."

"That is so, sergeant; we shall have to dismount and drive them out foot by foot. There's nothing else for it."

By this time all the party had come up, and Reuben explained to them the situation. All at once agreed that they could do nothing on horseback on such ground. The whole party therefore dismounted. The horses were tied to bushes, and the prisoner securely fastened to a tree. Then rifle in hand they moved forward.

The sergeant's eye had not deceived him, for as they approached the spot where the boulders and bush grew thickest a shower of spears was thrown, and the native cry rose shrill in the air. The party were advancing in skirmishing order, and most of them threw themselves down or dodged behind rocks as the blacks rose to throw their spears, and a moment later the rifles cracked out. Several of the blacks fell and the rest disappeared among the bushes.

"Make your way forward steadily and carefully. Let each man watch his neighbour to the right and left, and keep in line as much as you can."

The fight now commenced in earnest, but the settlers and police gradually made their way forward. Not only had they the advantage in weapons, but the fact that they were able to fire while lying down or stooping gave them an immense advantage over the blacks, who had to expose themselves when rising to throw their spears or take aim with their bows.

Several times, emboldened by their superior numbers, the blacks attempted a rush, but the heavy fire from rifle and pistol which greeted them each time sent them back in diminished numbers. At last the resistance became feebler, as the natives, seeing that they were being driven out of their shelter, began to slink off so as not to be exposed to the fire of the white men in the comparatively open ground beyond. Many, however, were not quick enough, and were shot down as they scaled the steep hillside.

The party of whites gathered and compared notes. Many had received wounds more or less severe, but none of a nature to prevent them from continuing their journey. They quickly returned, to their horses, and mounting, continued their way.

"There is no fear of any further attack I should think, sergeant?"

"I should think not, sir. The beggars must have had enough of it. They must have lost from forty to fifty men."

Two hours later the party arrived at the halting place.

"Now, sergeant," Reuben said, "I shall hand over the command to you and shall ride on at once with my boy. I am most anxious about the man who has escaped. I shall take four of the bushrangers' horses. They have not been ridden, and having had three or four days' rest, are comparatively fresh. The fellow has had only one day's start, and if I push straight on I may be there before him."

Reuben briefly bade adieu to his friends while Jim was transferring the saddles to two of the bushrangers' horses, and leading two others, they started together in darkness. Changing saddles every ten miles, they rode on till past midnight, when they halted, for the horses, accustomed as they were to long journeys, were now completely broken down, and Jim and his master could scarce keep their seats.

"Too much long," Jim said, as he threw himself down after taking off the saddles and hobbling the horses; "too much long, sah."

"It is long, Jim," Reuben replied. "People in England would hardly believe horses could go a hundred miles in a day even if led a part of the distance. Another fifty miles will take us to Donald's. It is about twenty miles to the waterhole where we camped the first night, and that was about thirty miles from the station."

"Shall Jim light a fire, sah?"

"No, Jim, it isn't worth while. There is some cold meat in my haversack if you are hungry, but I am too tired to

eat. If there are any natives prowling about a fire might bring them round on us."

"No tink black fellows near, massa."

"I don't think so either, but I don't want to run the risk, Jim; besides, I am sure neither of us can be trusted to keep watch."

Reuben, in spite of his fatigue, was some time before he could get off to sleep. The thought that probably Tom Thorne was at that time camped at the waterhole twenty miles ahead, and that in the morning his horse would be far fresher than those he had ridden, was maddening to him. At one time he thought of getting up and pursuing his way on foot; but he was stiff in every limb, and felt that the journey was beyond him; moreover, if the bushranger had taken some other line and was not camping there, he would have no means of pursuing his journey.

At the first gleam of daylight they were afoot, the saddles were put on the horses, and they continued their way. Reuben soon found, however, that the five hours he had rested had been insufficient to restore the horses, and even by riding them alternately he could get them but little beyond a walk. On arriving at the waterhole the remains of a fire were found. Jim examined the ground carefully, and found the tracks of a horse, and was of opinion that the rider had started three or four hours previously. Reuben carried a large flask of spirits, and having poured what remained in it down the throats of the horses and given them a drink at the pool, he again pressed on. Ten miles farther he arrived at the first outlying station. The owner of this had not joined in the expedition, being a married man, and unwilling to leave his wife in such an exposed position. But upon Reuben's arrival he at once agreed to lend him two fresh horses,

and to take care of those which Reuben brought with him. While the settler was driving them in from the paddock his wife busied herself in preparing two huge bowls of bread and milk. They were thankfully swallowed by Reuben and Jim, and five minutes later they started on the fresh horses.

It was indeed a relief to Reuben's anxiety to find himself again flying over the ground at a rapid gallop after the slow and tedious pace at which he had travelled since morning. His spirits rose, and the fears which had oppressed him seemed lifted as if by magic. He assured himself that he had no cause for anxiety, for that the two constables would assuredly be on the watch, and Kate had promised not to venture beyond the doors of the house until his return.

CHAPTER XV

SETTLING ACCOUNTS

REUBEN soon checked the speed of his horse. Anxious as he was to arrive as soon as possible, he might, for aught he knew, yet have occasion to try the animal to the utmost, and he therefore reduced the almost racing pace at which he had started into an ordinary steady gallop. The horses were fresh and in good condition, and for several miles kept up the pace without flagging. Then they were allowed to ease down into a walk until they got their wind again, and then started at the pace, half-canter, half-gallop, which is the usual rate of progression of the colonial horses. They drew rein at last on a slight eminence from which the Donalds' station, a mile or so distant, could be perceived.

"Thank God," Reuben muttered to himself, "I am back here at last. There is no occasion for further hurry." and the horses were allowed to go at an easy walk.

"Man on horseback," Jim suddenly said, touching Reuben's arm.

"Where—where, Jim?"

"Gone from de house, sah, trough dem trees. Dare he he go again, he gallop fast."

Reuben had not caught sight of the figure, but he pressed his spurs against the horse's sides. "I will see who it is at any rate. Jim, do you ride straight on to the house and say I shall be there in a few minutes."

As Reuben rode at a headlong gallop towards the point where his course would probably intersect that of the horseman riding in the direction Jim had pointed out, he turned over rapidly in his mind the thought whether his anxiety for Kate Ellison was not making a fool of him. Why should he turn from his course just at the end of a long journey to start at full speed on the track of this figure of which Jim had caught only a glance. It might be a stockman or someone who had ridden over from one of the neighbouring stations to see how Donald was getting on; but even so, he told himself, no harm was done by his assuring himself of that. It was not the way Mr. Barker would take to his station; had it been a neighbour who had come over he would not be likely to leave again so early; neither of the constables would be riding away in defiance of his orders on no account to stir any distance from the house.

Presently he caught a glimpse of the horseman. He was not more than half a mile away now, but the view he obtained was so instantaneous that he could not distinguish any particulars.

"He is riding fast, anyhow," he said—"faster than a

man would travel on ordinary business. He is either a messenger sent on urgent business or it is Thorne."

He slightly altered the direction of his course, for the speed at which the horseman was travelling must take him ahead of him at the point where Reuben had calculated upon cutting him off. In a short distance he would get a view of him, for the trees ended here and the plain was open and unbroken save by low bush. When the figure came clear of the trees he was but a quarter of a mile away, and Reuben gave a start for he recognized at once the uniform of his own corps. It could only be one of the men left at Donald's, and, with an exclamation of anger, Reuben pressed his horse to the utmost in pursuit of the man, who was now almost directly ahead, at the same time uttering a loud call.

The man glanced back, but to Reuben's surprise, instead of stopping, waved his hand above his head and pressed forward. Two miles were traversed before Reuben was beside him.

"What do you mean, sir?" he thundered out.

But the man pointed ahead.

"He has carried off Miss Ellison, sir, and has shot Brown dead. I will tell you afterwards. There, do you see, sir, over that brow there."

At that moment Reuben saw a figure on horseback rise against the skyline fully two miles in front.

"Ride steadily, Smithson," he said; "keep me in view, and I will keep him. We must overtake him in time, for his horse is carrying double. I shall push on, for I am better mounted than you are, and he may try to double and throw us off his traces. If anything happens to me don't stop for a moment, but hunt that fellow down to the end."

Reuben had been holding his horse somewhat in hand

during the last mile, for he thought there must be some reason for the constable's strange conduct, but he now let him go, and urging him to his full speed, soon left the constable behind. He knew that for some distance ahead the country was flat and unbroken, and that the fugitive would have no chance of concealment whichever way he turned. Upon reaching the spot where he had seen the bushranger pass, the wide plain opened before him, and he gave a shout of exultation as he saw that he had gained considerably. The fugitive, indeed, had evidently not been pressing his horse.

"He thinks he has a long journey before him," Reuben muttered. "I fancy he's mistaken. He thinks he's only got a constable after him, and that he can easily rid himself of him whenever he comes up to him. No doubt he learned from some of the convicts that everyone is away, and therefore thinks himself safe from all pursuit when once he has wiped out Smithson. All the better. I shall overtake him all the sooner."

Such indeed was the view of the bushranger, who kept along at a steady canter, troubling himself very little about the solitary constable whom he believed to be in pursuit of him. When, indeed, on glancing round he saw that his pursuer was within a quarter of a mile of him, he reined in his horse, and turning, calmly awaited his coming.

Reuben at once checked the speed of his horse. He knew that the man was said to be a deadly shot with his pistol, but he was confident in his own skill, for, with constant and assiduous practice, he had attained a marvellous proficiency with his weapon. But he did not care to give his foe the advantage which a man sitting on a steady seat possesses over one in the saddle of a galloping horse; he therefore advanced only at a walk.

The bushranger put down the change in speed to fear caused by his resolute attitude, and shouted:

"Look here, constable; you had best turn your horse's head and go home again. You know well enough that one constable is no match for me, so you had best rein up before I put a bullet in your head. If you shoot you are just as likely to kill the young woman here as you are me, and you know I don't make any mistake."

Reuben was already conscious of his disadvantage in this respect, for the bushranger held the girl on the saddle in front of him, so that her body completely covered his. She was enveloped in a shawl which covered her head as well as her figure. Her captor held her tightly pressed to him with his left arm, while his right was free to use a pistol.

Reuben checked his horse at a distance of some fifty yards, while he thought over the best course to pursue. As he paused, Thorne, for the first time, noticed that it was an officer with whom he had to deal, and not with the constable who, as he believed, was the only one in the district. He uttered a savage exclamation, for he felt that this materially altered the conditions of the affair.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said; "I thought it was only one of your men; but the advice I gave is as good for you as for him. I advise you to turn back before all my mates are down on you."

"Your mates will never be down on anyone again, Tom Thorne," Reuben said sternly. "We have wiped out seven of them, and the other is a prisoner."

"It's a lie!" the bushranger said furiously. "They are two hundred miles away in the bush."

"With your friend Bobitu, eh? Yes, they were, but they are not now, Thorne. They are lying under the ashes of that hut of yours close to the tree where you

buried your treasure; and it's I who am going to have help, not you. My man will be up in a few minutes," and he glanced round at the constable, whom the bushranger now perceived for the first time less than half a mile away.

Reuben's words had the effect they were intended to excite. They filled the bushranger with fury and desire for vengeance, while the sight of the approaching constable showed him that unless he took prompt measures he would have two adversaries to fight at once.

Without a moment's hesitation he set spurs to his horse and dashed at Reuben. When within twenty yards he fired. Reuben felt a sharp pain as if a hot iron had been passed across his cheek. Thorne uttered a shout of exultation as he saw him start, but, as he kept his seat, again raised his hand to fire. In an instant Reuben discharged his pistol, and the bushranger's weapon dropped from his hand, for Reuben's bullet passed through his wrist.

Throwing the burden before him headlong to the ground Thorne drew a pistol with his left hand, and the two shots rang out again at almost the same instant. Reuben, however, was slightly the quickest, and this saved his life. His bullet passed through the bushranger's body, while Thorne's pistol was diverted somewhat from its aim, and the bullet struck Reuben's left shoulder instead of his head. In an instant he had drawn another pistol.

"Surrender or I fire!" and then seeing, by the change in the bushranger's face and by his collapsing figure, that he was badly hit, he waited, still keeping Thorne covered with the muzzle, for the bushranger had a charge left in the pistol which he still grasped in his left hand.

Twice Thorne tried to raise it, but in vain. Then he reeled in the saddle, the pistol dropped from his hand, and he fell heavily over on to the ground.

Reuben at once leaped from his horse and ran to raise Kate Ellison, who lay motionless on the ground as she had been thrown. Removing the shawl wrapped round her head he found she was insensible. Kneeling beside her, he raised her head to his shoulder, and a minute later the constable galloped up.

"Badly hurt, captain?" he asked as he leaped off his horse, for the blood was streaming down Reuben's face, and his left arm hung useless.

"Nothing to speak of, Smithson. See to Miss Ellison first. There is some water in my flask in the holster; just bring it here and sprinkle her face. I hope she is only stunned; but that scoundrel threw her off with such force that she may well be badly hurt."

"Is he done for, captain?" the man asked, glancing at the prostrate figure of the bushranger as he proceeded to obey Reuben's instructions; "because if you ain't certain about it I had better put a bullet into him. These fellows are very fond of playing 'possum and then turning the tables upon you."

"There is no fear of that, Smithson; he's hard hit. I hope he's not dead, for I would rather that he were tried for his crimes."

It was some time before Kate Ellison opened her eyes. For a moment she looked vaguely round, then, as her eyes fell upon Reuben's face, she uttered a little cry and raised herself into a sitting position.

"What is it, Captain Whitney? Are you badly hurt?"

"Thank God you have recovered, Miss Ellison. You began to frighten me horribly. I was afraid you were seriously injured. Do not look so alarmed. I can assure

you that I am not much hurt; only a flesh wound, I fancy, in the cheek and a broken collar bone."

"And you have saved me again, Captain Whitney?"

"Yes, thank God I have had that good fortune," Reuben said quietly; "and this time for good, for Tom Thorne will never molest you again."

"But can't I do something? Your face is bleeding dreadfully. Please let me bind it up," and tearing a strip off the bottom of her dress she proceeded to bandage Reuben's face.

The constable took off the black silk handkerchief which he wore round his neck.

"I think, miss, this will make a sling for his arm, and when that is done the captain will be pretty right. Do you think you can ride back, sir?" he asked when he had fastened the handkerchief, "or will you wait till I ride back to the farm and fetch help?"

"I can ride back well enough," Reuben said, trying to rise to his feet; but he found himself unable to do so. The ball, after breaking his collar bone, had glanced downwards, and the wound was a more serious one than he had imagined. "No, I don't think I can ride back, Smithson."

"There is a light cart at the farm," Kate Ellison said; "please fetch that. I will stop here with Captain Whitney till you come back."

"I think that will be the best way, miss," the constable agreed, and, mounting, he rode off at once.

It was an hour and a half before he returned bringing the cart; but before he arrived Mr. and Mrs. Barker had ridden up on horseback, the former having returned from his visit to the farm just as the constable rode in. While they had been alone Reuben had heard from Kate what had taken place.

"I did as you told me, Captain Whitney, and did not go once outside the door. The constables kept a very sharp lookout, and one of them was always on guard by the door, so there really did not seem any possibility of danger. This morning as I was washing up the breakfast things with Mrs. Barker a shot was suddenly fired outside the door, and before I had time to think what it meant that man rushed in. He caught me by the wrist, and said, 'Come along, it's no use your screaming.' Mrs. Barker caught up something and rushed at him, but he knocked her down with the butt end of his pistol. Then he caught up her shawl, which was lying on the chair close by, and threw it right over my head, and then caught me up and carried me out. I tried to struggle, but he seemed to hold me as if I were in a vice. I heard Alice scream, and then I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew was that I was being carried along on horseback. I was so muffled up, and he held me so tight, that I felt it was no use to struggle, and I made up my mind to lie quite still as if I was still insensible, till he put me down, and then—I think I intended to try and seize his pistol, or to get hold of a knife if there was one, and if I could not kill him to kill myself. There did not seem the least hope of rescue. Mr. Barker was away and would not be back for hours. I supposed that the constables were shot, and all the men round were away with you; and from the distance you said you were going, I did not think you could be back for days. Presently I felt him stop and turn his horse, and then when he spoke I knew that he had not killed both the constables, and that one of them had followed him. When you answered I thought it was your voice, though it seemed impossible; but I could not be sure, because I could not hear plainly through the shawl. Then the pistols were fired, and I suddenly felt

myself falling, and I did not know anything more till I saw you leaning over me. But where are all the others, and how is it you are here alone? Of course you must have turned back before you got to where the bush-rangers were."

"No, I am glad to say we succeeded with that part of the work, Miss Ellison, and have wiped out the bush-rangers altogether. We have got one of them a prisoner, but all the rest of the gang are killed. The distance is not quite so far as we thought it was. It was a thirty miles' march and two sixties. We attacked them at daybreak on the third day after leaving."

"But it is only the fourth day to-day, is it not? At least it seems so to me."

"It is the fourth day, Miss Ellison. When we found that the leader of the gang was not with them, and I learned from the man we had taken prisoner that he had started to ride back here twenty-four hours before, I was naturally very anxious about you, knowing as I did what desperate actions the man was capable of. So we started at once, and, after a sharp fight with the blacks, got down in the evening to the waterhole sixty miles on our way back, where we had camped the second night out. Of course the horse I had ridden could travel no further, but I pushed on with my black boy on two of the horses which we had taken from the bushrangers, and which had been led so far. We made another forty miles by midnight, and then halted till daybreak to give the horses rest, but they were so done up this morning that we could not get them much beyond a footpace. When we came to the first settlement we exchanged them for fresh ones and galloped on, and thank God we are just in time."

The tears were standing in the girl's eyes, and she laid her hand on his and said quietly:

"Thank you. Then you have ridden a hundred and fifty miles since yesterday morning, besides having two fights, and all because you were uneasy about me?"

"I had, as you see, good reason to be uneasy, Miss Ellison."

At this moment a horse's hoofs were heard approaching, and Jim galloped up. He had on arriving at the station been unable to obtain any information as to what had taken place. Mrs. Donald was in a dead faint. Mrs. Barker had just before he arrived ridden off to meet her husband; but the dead body of the constable by the door and the disappearance of Kate showed him what had taken place, and he at once started after his master.

His horse, however, was a very inferior one to that ridden by Reuben, and until he met the constable returning he had been obliged to follow the track of the horses in front, so he did not arrive at the scene of the fray till half an hour after its conclusion. He uttered exclamations of dismay at seeing his master's condition, for Reuben had been gradually growing faint, and could now scarcely support himself on his elbow.

Jim, however, had taken the precaution to snatch a bottle of spirits from the shelf before he started, having an eye to his own comforts as well as to the possibility of its being required. He now knocked off the neck and poured some into the cup of Reuben's flask and put it to his lips.

"Thank you, Jim; that is just what I wanted."

"Massa lie down quiet," Jim said; "no good sit up;" and gathering a large bunch of grass he placed it under Reuben's head, and Reuben lay quiet in a half-dreamy state until Mr. and Mrs. Barker rode up.

Kate rose to her feet as they approached, but she was so stiff and bruised with her fall that she could scarcely

move forward to meet Mrs. Barker, and burst into tears as her friend threw her arms round her.

"That's right, my poor child," Mrs. Barker said; "a cry will do you good. Thank God, my dear Kate, for your rescue."

"I do indeed, Mrs. Barker. It seems almost a miracle."

"Captain Whitney seems to spring out of the ground whenever he's wanted. He seems hurt badly. The constable said it was a broken collar bone, but it must be something a good deal worse than that."

"Oh, don't say so, Mrs. Barker, after what he's done for me. If he were to die!"

"There, there, don't tremble so, child; we must hope that it is not so bad as that; but he would hardly be looking so bad as he does for only a broken collar bone. My husband broke his one day the horse ran away with him among some trees, and he was up and about again in a day or two.

"Is he badly hurt, do you think, John?" she asked her husband, who was kneeling beside Reuben.

"I hope not," the settler said. "He ought not to be like this only from a wound in the collar bone; but of course it may have glanced down and done some internal mischief. I am inclined to think that it is extreme exhaustion as much as anything—the reaction after a tremendous nervous excitement."

"He has ridden a hundred and fifty miles since yesterday morning," Kate said, "and has had two fights besides this. Directly he knew that the leader of the bushrangers had escaped he came on by himself."

"Oh! they caught the bushrangers, did they?" Mr. Barker said joyfully. "I was afraid by his getting back here so soon that they must have missed them somehow,

and found they were on the wrong scent. And he has ridden all the way back; has he? A very zealous officer, Miss Ellison, a very zealous young officer indeed." But Kate was too anxious and shaken to mark the significance of Mr. Barker's tone.

"Don't tease her," his wife said in a low voice "She is terribly upset and shaken, and can hardly stand. Ah! what is that?"

The interruption was caused by a low groan from the fallen bushranger.

"Shoot him dead, sah," Jim, who was supporting his master's head, exclaimed. "Don't let dat fellow come 'live no longer."

"I can't do that, Jim," Mr. Barker said, moving towards the fallen man. "The man is a thorough scoundrel, a murderer, and a robber; but he is harmless now. One cannot wish he should recover, even for his own sake, for there is enough against him to hang him ten times over. However, we must do what we can for the poor wretch."

So saying he mixed some brandy with a little water in the cup, and poured it between the bushranger's lips.

"Is it mortal?" Mrs. Barker asked as he rejoined her.

"I think so," he said; "I fancy he is shot through the lungs."

"You must really sit down, Miss Ellison; you look as white as a ghost, and we cannot have you on our hands just now. We have got them pretty full as they are. Ah! here comes the cart."

The constable had put a quantity of straw in the bottom of the light cart, and Barker and Jim raised Reuben and laid him in it.

"We must take the other too," Mr. Barker said; "the man is alive, and we can't leave him here."

"Yes," Kate said; "he must go too. He did Reuben a great wrong years ago. I hope he will confess it before he dies."

Mr. Barker glanced at his wife as Kate used the young officer's Christian name; but she was not thinking of Captain Whitney of the police, but of the boy Reuben who had been accused of poisoning her father's dog, and of committing a burglary at his house.

"You had better get up in front with the constable, Miss Ellison," the settler said when the two wounded men had been placed in the cart; "you certainly are not fit to ride. Or, look here, the constable shall take my horse and I will drive, and then I can look after you, and you can use me for a prop if you feel weak; but before we start I must insist on your taking a sip of brandy and water. It is no use your saying no," he persisted as the girl shook her head. "We shall have you fainting before you get home if you don't."

Kate did as she was ordered. Mr. Barker then helped her up to her seat. As she got up her eyes fell upon Reuben's face.

"Oh, Mr. Barker!" she said, "he looks dead. You are not deceiving me, are you?"

"Bless me, no!" the settler said cheerfully. "My opinion is that he's dead asleep. The loss of blood, the sudden reaction after the long excitement, and the exhaustion of his ride have completely overcome him, and my opinion is that he is sound asleep."

"Jim, do you lead your master's horse, while the constable takes the other, and then you two had better ride on and help Mrs. Donald get things ready. Get a bed up at once for Captain Whitney, and get some clean

straw in the outhouse with one of the rugs over it for the other."

So saying he touched the horse with the whip, and the cart moved slowly on with Mrs. Barker riding beside it. She would have gone on ahead to have assisted in the preparations, but she expected momentarily to see Kate faint, and thought it better to remain with her in case her assistance should be required. The journey occupied some time, for Mr. Barker picked the way carefully so as not to jolt the cart.

Mrs. Barker endeavoured to keep Kate's attention fixed by asking her questions as to what she had heard about the expedition, wondering when it would return, and whether any of the settlers were hurt. When they got within half a mile of home she said:

"I think, dear, you are looking a little better now. I will ride on. Fortunately there is the beef tea we made last night for Mr. Donald. I will get it made hot, and I will get a cup of strong tea ready for you. That will do wonders."

When the cart arrived Mrs. Donald ran out, and as Kate descended clasped her in a long embrace.

"Come straight in here, my dear," Mrs. Barker said. "I have got a basin of cold water and a cup of strong tea, and the two together will do marvels. We will attend to your wounded hero."

Reuben remained perfectly quiet and inert as he was lifted out and carried into the house, where a bed had been made up for him in a room on the ground floor.

"Just lay him down. Throw a blanket over him, and let him lie perfectly quiet."

"Do you think he is really asleep?" Mrs. Barker asked as she looked at the quiet face.

"I do really," her husband replied. "Put your ear

close to his mouth. He is breathing as quietly as a child, and," he added, placing his fingers on Reuben's wrist, "his pulse is a little fast, but regular and quiet; twenty-four hours of sleep will set him up again, unless I am greatly mistaken. I don't expect that his wound will turn out anything very serious. Let me think. Was it not this afternoon that Ruskin said he would be back again?"

"Yes, either yesterday or to-day."

"That is lucky. He will be surprised at finding two new patients on his hands now. I will go and have a look at that poor wretch in the shed. Give me a cupful of beef tea, I will pour a spoonful or two between his lips. You had better go and look after Kate. You will not be needed here at present. If your master wakes, Jim, let us know directly," he said to the black, who had seated himself on the ground by the side of Reuben's bed.

"I can't call the poor fellow away from his master," he added to his wife as he closed the door behind them; "but I am really anxious to know what has taken place out in the bush, and whether many of our fellows have been killed. If, as Kate said, she heard the captain tell the bushranger that all his band had been killed, except one who is a prisoner, it has indeed been a most successful expedition, and we colonists can hardly be sufficiently grateful to Whitney for having rid us of these pests. What with that, and the thrashing the blacks have had, we shall be able to sleep quietly for months, which is more than we have done for a long time."

Kate came out of the room with Mrs. Donald a minute later. The basin of cold water and the tea had had the effect Mrs. Barker predicted. A little colour had returned into her cheeks, and she looked altogether more like herself.

"How is he?" Mrs. Donald asked.

"In my opinion he's doing capitally, Mrs. Donald; his pulse is quiet and even, and he's breathing as quietly as a child, and I believe he is simply in a state of exhaustion, from which he is not likely to wake till to-morrow morning, and I predict that in a few days he will be up and about. Indeed, if that bullet hasn't misbehaved itself, I see no reason why he shouldn't be up to-morrow."

"That is indeed a relief to us both," Mrs. Donald said, while Kate could only clasp her hands in silent thankfulness.

"And now, how is your husband? I hope he is none the worse for all this exertion."

"He was terribly agitated at first," Mrs. Donald said. "I fainted, you know, and he got out of bed to help me up, and it was as much as I could do when I recovered to get him to lie down, for he wanted to mount and ride after Kate, although, of course, he is as weak as a child, and even with my help he could scarcely get into bed again. Fortunately Mrs. Barker ran in, before she started on horseback to fetch you, to say that the constable was off in pursuit, and that quieted him. Then I think he was occupied in trying to cheer me, for as soon as he was in bed I broke down and cried till the constable came back to say that Captain Whitney had overtaken and shot the bushranger."

Three hours later, to the great relief of all, the surgeon arrived. He was first taken in to look at Reuben, having been told all the circumstances of the case, and he confirmed Mr. Barker's opinion that he was really in a deep sleep.

"I would not wake him on any account," he said; "it is a great effort of nature, and he will, I hope, awake

quite himself. Of course I can't say anything about the wound till he does. Now for his antagonist."

The bushranger was still unconscious, though occasionally broken words came from his lips. The surgeon examined his wound. "He is shot through the lungs," he said, "and is bleeding internally. I do not think that there is the shadow of a chance for him, and no one can wish it otherwise. It will only save the colony the expense of his trial. And now for my original patient."

He was some time in Mr. Donald's room, and when he came out proceeded at once to mix him a soothing draught from the case of medicines he carried behind the saddle.

"We must get him off to sleep if we can," he said, "or we shall have him in a high state of fever before morning. A man in his state can't go through such excitement as he has done without paying the penalty. And now, I suppose, I have done," he said with a smile as Mrs. Donald left the room with the medicine.

"Yes, I think so," Mrs. Barker said; "if you had come an hour earlier I should have put this young lady under your charge, but I think that the assurance of my husband that Captain Whitney was doing well has been a better medicine than you could give her."

"No wonder she is shaken," Mr. Ruskin remarked. "Mrs. Barker tells me you had a heavy fall, too, Miss Ellison."

"Yes," she replied. "I was stunned for a time, but beyond being stiff and bruised I am none the worse for it."

"Look here, Miss Ellison," the doctor said, after putting his fingers on her wrist, "I suppose you will want to be about to-morrow when our brave army returns. Now there is nothing you can do here. Mrs. Donald can

nurse her husband, the other two require no nursing. Mrs. Barker, I am sure, will take charge of the house, and therefore, seriously, I would ask you to take this draught I am about to mix for you, and to go upstairs and go to bed and sleep till morning."

"I could not sleep," Kate protested.

"Very well, then, lie quiet without sleeping, and if in the evening you find you are restless you can come down for an hour or two; but I really must insist on your lying down for a bit. Now, Mrs. Barker, will you take this medicine up and put this young lady to bed."

"I hope she will get off to sleep," Mrs. Barker said when she came downstairs again.

"I have no doubt whatever about it," Mr. Ruskin replied. "I have given her a very strong sleeping draught, far stronger than I should think of giving at any other time; but after the tension that the poor girl must have gone through, it would need a strong dose to take effect. I think you will hear nothing more of her till the morning."

Indeed it was not until the sun was well up the next morning that Kate Ellison woke. She could hardly believe that she had slept all night, but the eastern sun coming in through her window showed her that she had done so. She still felt bruised and shaken all over, but was otherwise herself again. She dressed hastily and went downstairs.

"That's right, my dear," Mrs. Barker, who was already busy in the kitchen, said. "You look bonny and like yourself."

"How are my brother and Captain Whitney?" Kate asked.

"I don't think Mr. Donald is awake yet," Mrs. Barker replied; "but Captain Whitney has just gone out to the shed with my husband and the surgeon."

"Gone out to the shed!" Kate repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, my dear. That poor wretch out there is going fast. He recovered consciousness about two hours ago. The constable was sitting up with him. He asked for water, and then lay for some time quite quiet. Then he said, 'Am I dreaming, or was it Reuben Whitney I fought with?' 'Yes, it was Captain Reuben Whitney, our inspector,' the constable replied.

"For a time he lay quiet again, and then said: 'I want to see him.' The constable told him he was asleep and couldn't be woke.

"'Is he badly wounded?' the man asked. 'I know I hit him.' 'Not very badly, I hope,' the constable answered. 'When he wakes ask him to come to me,' the man said. 'I know I am dying, but I want to see him first. If he can't come let somebody else come.' The constable came in and roused the doctor, who went out and saw him, and said he might live three or four hours yet. Soon afterwards, just as the sun rose, Jim came out to say that his master was awake. Mr. Ruskin went in to him and examined his wound and probed the course of the bullet. It had lodged down just at the bottom of the shoulder bone. I am glad to say he was able to get it out. When he had done he told his patient what the bushranger had said, and Captain Whitney insisted upon going out to him."

"It won't do him any harm, will it?" Kate asked anxiously.

"No, my dear, or Mr. Ruskin would not have let him go. I saw him as he went out, and shook hands with him, and, except that nasty bandage over his face, he looked quite himself again. As I told you, a broken collar bone is a mere nothing, and now we know where the bullet

went and have got it out, there is no occasion for the slightest anxiety. Here they come again, so you can judge for yourself."

A very few words passed between Reuben and Kate, for Mrs. Barker, who saw how nervous the girl was, at once began to ask him questions about what the bush-ranger had said.

"He has made a confession, Mrs. Barker, which your husband has written down and Mr. Ruskin and Smithson have signed. It is about a very old story in which I was concerned when a boy, but it is a great gratification for me to have it cleared up at last. I was accused of poisoning a dog belonging to Miss Ellison's father, and was tried for a burglary committed on the premises, and was acquitted; however, the imputation would have rested on me all my life if it had not been for Thorne's confession. I thought that he did the first affair. I knew that he was concerned in the second, although I could not prove it; but he has now made a full confession, saying that he himself poisoned the dog, and confirming the story I told at the trial."

"Oh, I am glad!" Kate exclaimed. "You know, Captain Whitney, that I was sure of your innocence, but I know how you must have longed for it to be proved to the world. What will you do, Mr. Barker, to make it public?"

"I shall send a copy of the confession, properly attested, to the magistrates of Lewes, and another copy to the paper which, Captain Whitney tells me, is published there weekly. It is curious," he went on, "that the sight of Whitney should have recalled those past recollections, while, so far as I could see, everything that has happened afterwards, his career of crime and the blood that he has shed, seem altogether forgotten."

"I suppose there is no hope for him?" Kate asked in a low voice.

"He is dying now," Mr. Barker said. "Ruskin is with him. He was fast becoming unconscious when we left him, and Ruskin said that the end was at hand."

A quarter of an hour later the surgeon came in with the news that all was over.

"Now, Captain Whitney, you must come into your room and let me bandage up your shoulder properly. I hadn't half time to do it before."

"But you won't want me to lie in bed or any nonsense of that sort?" Reuben asked.

"I would if I thought you would obey my orders; but as I see no chance of that, I shall not trouble to give them. Seriously, I do not think there is any necessity for it, providing always that you will keep yourself very quiet. I shall bandage your arm across your chest, so there can be no movement of the shoulder, and when that is done I think you will be all right."

There was only one more question which Reuben had to ask with regard to the event of the preceding day—why it was that Smithson did not go to his comrade's assistance. He then learned that Thorne rode quietly up to the back of the house and dismounted, then went to the stable, where Smithson was asleep, having been on guard during the night, and pushed a piece of wood under the latch of the door, so that it could not be raised. Having thus securely fastened Smithson in, he had gone to the front of the house, and had apparently shot down the constable there before the latter was aware of his presence.

Smithson, awakened by the shot, tried in vain to get out, and was only released by Mrs. Barker when she recovered from the effect of the stunning blow which the

bushranger had struck her. He had then mounted at once and followed in pursuit.

In the afternoon the party returned from the bush, having experienced no further molestation from the natives. Nothing occurred to interfere with the progress of Reuben's wound, and in the course of a fortnight he was again able to resume his duties. The complete destruction of the gang of bushrangers, and the energy with which they had been pursued into the very heart of the bush country, made a vast sensation in the colony, and Reuben gained great credit and instant promotion for his conduct.

A month after the return of the party from the bush Mr. Donald was about again, and as the danger was now past he abandoned his idea of selling his property.

The course which events took can be judged by the following conversation between Mrs. Donald and her sister three months later.

"Well, Kate, after all he has done for us, of course I have nothing to say against it, and I don't suppose you would mind if I had; still, I do think you might have done better."

"I could not have done better," Kate said hotly, "not if I had had the pick of the whole colony."

"Well, not in one way, my dear, for you know that personally I like him almost as well as you do. Still I do think it is a little unfortunate that—we ever knew him before."

"And I think it's extremely fortunate," Kate said stoutly. "If it hadn't been that he had known us before and cared for me ever since I was a child, he would never have made that terrible ride, and I——"

"Oh, don't talk about it, Kate; it's too dreadful even to think of now. Well, my dear, no doubt it's all for

the best," Alice said philosophically. "At any rate, you are quite happy, and he is a noble fellow. But I hope for your sake that he won't stay in the police. It would be dreadful for you when he was riding about hunting after bushrangers and blacks, for you know, my dear, there are plenty of others left in the colony."

"I told him so yesterday," Kate said shyly. "I said, of course, that I didn't want to influence him."

Alice broke into a laugh. "You little goose, as if what you say doesn't influence him."

Three weeks later Reuben received a letter from Mr. Hudson.

"My dear Whitney, I am glad to hear from you that you are engaged to be married, and the circumstances which you tell me of make it a most interesting affair. If I were you I should cut the constabulary. I enclose a paper from Wilson giving you three weeks' leave. Come down to Sydney at once, and talk it over with me. You know I regard you as my son, and I am going to have a voice in the matter."

Reuben went down to Sydney, and after ascertaining his views, Mr. Hudson went into town and forthwith arranged for the purchase for him of a partnership in the chief engineering firm in the town. When he told Captain Wilson what he had done the latter declared that he had robbed the colony of its best police officer. Reuben protested against the generosity of the old settler, but the latter declared he would have no nonsense on the subject.

"I am one of the richest men in the colony," he said, "and it's hard if I can't spend my money as I choose."

There is little more to tell. Reuben became one of the leading citizens of Sydney, and twenty years afterwards sold his business and returned to England and bought an estate not far from Lewes, where he is still living with

his wife and family. He was accompanied from Australia by his mother, who, in spite of her strong objections to the sea, went out to live with him two years after his marriage. The only point upon which Reuben Whitney and his wife have never been able to come to an absolute agreement is as to which owes most to the other.